

WHOM THE GODS LOVE

Fulvia, narrator of this story, arrived in Rome, when Nero was Emperor, in the 812th year of the city. She did not know who she was or where she came from. Ill and desperate, she was taken in by a family of Christians whose faith she adopted, and later she became the protégée of the Cornelian family. She and Tiberius, the son of the house, became such close friends that their fortunes remained linked even after Fulvia's happy marriage. Their circle was one of feckless young people with aristocratic tastes but little money. Youth and intelligence meant restlessness, for what was there to believe in and what to aim for in an Empire over-ripe and beginning to rot? Fulvia's temperament and her faith gave her a certain balance, but those she loved and watched were strangers to stability and safety. Tiberius, a poet, was trying to write in a new way; his cousin Quintus was painting in a new way; all of them, whether they would or no, were having to live in a new way. It was an irresponsible and pleasant life, but it was always threatened by poverty and even by sudden death. When the city went up in flames, the disaster had a certain inevitability.

Writing with strict attention to historical fact, Maria Browne presents her characters in modern terms; her book is not simply a reconstruction of the period, but also a story, of young people growing up anywhere, in any period when old gods have died and new ones are not yet recognized.

WHOM THE GODS LOVE

by
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*In the name of God, the Compassionate,
the Merciful.'*

To the unknown author of the
COPA SURISCA
in gratitude for a vision of the Italy
which both he and I know
and love

Whom the gods love die young.

MENANDER

*Damna tamen celeres reparant caelestia lunae:
Nos ubi decidimus
Quo pater Aeneas, quo dives Tullus et Ancus,
Pulvis et umbra sumus.*

Yet though the swift months bring back each
When we are laid [season's loss;
Where father Aeneas, good Tullus and Ancus are
We are dust and shade.

HORACE: *Odes IV 7*

*Gaudeamus igitur
Iuvenes dum sumus
Post jucundum juventutem
Post molestam senectutem
Nos habebit humus.*

*Vita nostra brevis est
Breve finietur
Venis mors velociter
Rapit nos atrociter
Nemini parcetur.*

Let us then be merry
While we are young:
After gay youth
After dull age
The earth will have us
We descend to the grave.

Our life is brief
Briefly ended.
Death comes quickly
Seizes us cruelly
Sparing none
From the power of his hand.

Mediaeval students' song

*Quant'è bella giovinezza
Che si fugge tuttavia;
Chi vuol esser lieto, sia;
Di doman non v'è certezza.*

Fairest youth passes swiftly.
If you would have happiness
Seize it now, for of the morrow
None can tell and none can guess.

LORENZO DE' MEDECI

*Pone merum et talos. Pereat qui
crastina curat,
Mors aurem vellens Vivite' ait Venio'.*

Set down the wine and the dice, and death
to who thinks of tomorrow
Death's twitching your ear : 'Live',
he says, 'I'm coming.'

Copa Surisca: Appendix Vergiliana

CHAPTER I

This is the story of my life from my arrival in Rome in the late May of the 812th year of the city in the consulships of C. Vip*st*apius and C. Fonteius, to my final departure from that city. I write not to amaze or interest other people: too many people have, like me, been through the extremes of poverty and wealth, seen all their friends die, walked themselves in the shadow of death and been obliged to leave their homes and start life afresh. Nor is it written to besmirch the character of that emperor under whom I suffered all these things; actions speak louder than words, and he does not need my testimony to condemn him. I write for my own pleasure, and propose to circulate this book only among a few trusted friends; it would be more than my life is worth to let it go farther. Perhaps when the present emperor is dead I may make it public.

Of my life before I arrived in Rome I remember nothing; this is put down by the doctors to the fever which I had just after my arrival; though why a fever, being a physical thing, should affect one mentally I cannot tell. The other explanation, which I shall give later on, as it was suggested to me, seems too fantastic to be true.

The few dim muddled memories I have of before my illness are of endless wanderings through dark foul-smelling alleyways where people with faces like those of the damned in Hell jeered at me from windows and tried to grab me as I went past their doorways – where even the children were like wizened little dwarfs and the very houses seemed to lean menacingly over as though to shut out the light. It recurs sometimes in nightmares, but then I am being chased, faster and faster until I finally wake in

terror. There could be no waking in real life but what happened was just as much of a relief: I had wandered down a street which turned sharply to the right and ended in a high white wall with a door in it. I pushed at the door: miraculously it opened and I found myself in a small flagged courtyard, very clean and sunny and silent after the alleys outside. I was long past caring whether I was trespassing or not, so I simply flopped down with my back to the wall, hitched up my feet on to a bit of my skirt to stop the stone burning my feet through the holes in my sandals and fell fast asleep.

As it turned out later I could hardly have stumbled into a kinder household. The master, one Aristobulus, was a Christian and finding me in his courtyard – finding moreover that by the time he found me I was in a high fever (I remember nothing of this myself; this is his account) he reckoned that as a Christian he could not do less than take me into his house and nurse me through. The fever lasted eight days, and on the ninth it cleared and I could speak rationally again instead of babbling senselessly.

Aristobulus then undertook to question me about my past life: My name? Fulvia. My age? Seventeen. Where did I live? Nowhere really. How long had I been in Rome? A few days only. Where had I come from? But I shook my head, dazed and worried, unable to answer that. At first he concluded I must be half-witted, but afterwards, finding that I could talk rationally on any subject except my past life, he decided that my memory must have gone back on me. Then he started to preach to me. I was an easy convert: the memory of those terrifying alleys, and the faces of the damned who mopped and mowed at me seemed even more terrible in comparison to this clean quiet household; Christianity was the only solid thing in the shifting chaos around me. I was baptized and the next Sunday partook of the Lord's supper together with the other Christians who had congregated at Aristobulus's house.

There was the usual concourse of people there: Jews, Greeks, slaves, artisans, small shopkeepers. I knew that Aristobulus was not well-off and wanted to find someone to take me in permanently but none of these looked the ~~one~~ to do it. Only at the end I saw two people obviously of a very different class from the others: a boy and girl, apparently about the same age as myself (I found out later that the boy was a year older, the girl two years younger) standing at the back of the room looking rather bewildered. Obviously Roman, obviously aristocratic. The girl was expensively dressed, in rather boring good taste with a little valuable jewellery, handsome face, brown hair and looking rather horrified. I judged that except to address orders to her father's slaves she had never spoken to anyone of the class of the people who surrounded her. The boy looked more at home but equally upper-class: impeccably folded toga, expensive well-made shoes, irregularly-featured face, but one that might be thought handsome, with a long bony nose, straight floppy black hair and the tufty beard of the very young boy. I stared at them for some time wondering what could bring them here.

Finally the boy said, 'I'm sorry, do I know you?'

'Not so far as I know. You may do' – wondering if here was someone who knew who I was.

'No, I was just thinking you looked as if you recognized me.'

'No, I was wondering how come you were a Christian.'

'I'm not. But I'm interested in other religions – I don't believe in Jupiter or any of the rest of it – so I got Tryphaena – you know Tryphaena? Over there, you see. She's my mother's maid – I got her to bring me and my sister Cornelia along to hear the preaching and Scripture readings. But you don't look like most of the Christians either. Or are you a Christian?'

'Why not? Yes, I am, a very new convert.'

'Most of them are Levantines of sorts. You can't be,

you're much too fair. Tremendously white skin. And you're freckled and burnt with the sun instead of tanning. I should say Cisalpine Gaul or possibly from the Province . . . Am I right?

'Well, your guess is as good as mine.' I explained the situation; from telling it so often before it had developed into a sort of sing-song recital. 'So you see here I am. I don't really think Aristobulus can afford to keep me much longer so I don't really know what's to become of me.'

'I wonder if we could do something. It's not much good being well-off if you don't help those who aren't. What do you think, Cornelia? Do you think she could come and live with us?'

'What would Daddy say?'

'I don't think he'd mind. Look at all the money he gives away to his clients. And she could do something – help Tryphaena with your's and mamma's dresses or something. I'm sorry to have to suggest that you should do slave's work,' he went on to me, 'but you know how it is.'

'Oh, don't mind about that, I'd do anything – wash dishes, scrub the floor, just for somewhere to live.'

'Oh, you won't have to do that. What's your name, by the way?'

'Fulvia.'

'Good, I'm Tiberius. Tiberius Cornelius Dolabella, son of the senator of that name. Well, I'll see what we can do for you.'

So in the end I moved in on them, first as poor relation-cum-slave, later I gradually became one of the family, dining with them even when there was a dinner party, sleeping in the bedroom next to Cornelia's, even having Tryphaena to do my hair and help me dress, and being treated by Tiberius and Cornelia exactly like a sister. My reception by the rest of the family was not quite so good: their father grumbled mildly, but had long ago given up trying to stop any of his children from doing anything they

wanted. Their mother objected rather more vehemently, saying that while she dared say Tiberius was telling the truth (obviously suspecting he wasn't) she still thought I looked hardly the sort of girl a respectable family liked to have about the house: in fact my Moral Character was probably such. . . .

Tiberius said, 'Don't be silly, Mummy, she's as pure as you are, I'm sure. Anyway Father says it's okay.' There was nothing to be said after this, and his mother went off grumbling.

Their eight-year-old brother Gaius, who believed in speaking his mind, said I was obviously simple-minded, and he was beginning to wonder whether his brother and sister were it too. Nevertheless I stayed, and stayed as one of the family, and when they moved to their villa for the summer there was no question but that I should go too. Cornelius, seeing that Tiberius was determined that I should be one of the family, while he refused to adopt me as his daughter, was prepared to support me till I got married, especially when it was pointed out to him that if he slung me out I could do nothing but go on the streets (this was not true: the Christians would probably have taken me in) and whatever he could say about me, I did not look that sort of girl. So I stayed, and Cornelius's wife prayed daily for my marriage.

Tiberius Cornelius's villa was on the Ligurian coast, a few miles from Portus Veneris. It was a small house, needing only about a dozen slaves to run it, but it was extremely comfortable; it stood up on a promontory at the mouth of a bay; a track ran down from the house and curved round the bay to join the Via Aurelia and run south to Rome, but we never used this. If one was sure-footed one could descend by winding goat-paths to the sea below and then jump from rock to rock along the bay till, about half a mile along the coast, the cliffs grew less steep and one

could scramble up them, and so inland. Or there was a place where a fold in the cliff hid one from view entirely except to anyone lying on the cliff above and looking down; but above was waste land, and no one came there, unless to look for a goat that had strayed. Tiberius called it the Hesperides, and the name suited it. There we would sit for hours on end — sometimes we would bring figs and cold polenta in a cloth and stay the whole day — and talk interminably. My memory had gone utterly about my own life, but I still retained a fair knowledge of literature, philosophy, politics and history, and on these subjects I could argue furiously and inaccurately for the whole day, if the others could stand it.

It was as we were sitting there one day, with the sea one moment a yard or more below our dangling bare feet, and the next washing round our ankles, that I asked them how they came to be at a Christian service.

'Tryphaena took us,' said Cornelia. 'I told you that.'

'Yes, but what made you want to go?'

Cornelia screwed up her face, and rocked to and fro trying to muster her reasons. 'Partly, they're rather different from other people — clean-living, sober and truthful, and not permanently over-eaten. And sort of — sort of confident as though — well I don't know why it is, but...'

'That's the *point*,' put in Tiberius. 'They *know*. They know that they and they alone have the key to salvation. They're the only people who've been able to find something solid in this world. The rest of us are just floundering about in a bog.'

'All religions promise that,' argued Cornelia, 'I still don't see why the Christians should be any different. But they are.'

'Religion is everything to them. And they believe theirs is the only true religion. Besides they have to live clean if they're expecting the second coming any moment.'

‘I don’t believe in the second coming, I mean not instanter. Do you, Fulvia?’

‘I don’t know. Anyway, it’s as well to be prepared for it. And our Lord said it would come when least expected.’

‘Well, that proves it’s not coming immediately,’ said ~~Cornelia~~ triumphantly, ‘because everyone’s expecting it now.’

‘Only the Christians,’ argued Tib. ‘Anyway quite apart from what the Christians think, I think the world must be coming to an end, because (a) the world couldn’t exist without the Empire, and (b) the Empire is obviously going to crack up any minute now with that hog Nero at the head. Therefore the world is coming to an end. Q.E.D.’

The first of these premises was undeniable, but ~~Cornelia~~ was perfectly prepared to argue with the second.

‘The Empire can’t crash just because of one man. Anyway – changing her ground, always an unwise thing to do in our argument – he’ll sober up. After all he’s quite young: he’s only twenty-one.’

‘If you regard committing incest with one’s mother and then murdering her as sobering up I don’t think much of your sense of values.’

‘He didn’t commit incest with her; that’s just gossip. And at least it’s a good thing she’s out of the way, she had the most awful influence for evil over him. Acting independently he may be better.’

‘Not if his first independent act is to murder her; besides she had awfully little influence over him towards the end. Besides, look at those games he instituted to celebrate his shaving for the first time. Not merely going on the stage himself, and setting a bad example, but making a lot of decent upper-class people perform too. And those drink shops – and worse – that sprang up round where they were being performed.’

‘This summer, was it?’ I enquired.

‘That’s right: just before he got rid of his mum. That

was terrific : sent her out in a boat designed to fall to bits once it was well out; and she got picked up by some fishermen and put ashore so he sent some chaps to stab her. Certainly ingenious, if hardly moral.'

Cornelia became aware that, as far as she was concerned, the conversation had got out of control; so she resorted to the last device of the defeated, that of saying that it was time for dinner. Gaius was called out of the water, where he had been pickling himself for the past three hours, and we slung our sandals round our necks and set off home across the rocks.

Tiberius fancied himself as a poet and used sometimes to spend whole mornings locked in his room, scribbling away furiously. I sympathized strongly, Cornelia less so and Gaius not at all. He used to go and bang on Tiberius's door: 'Come on out and have a bathe (bang, bang). No good fowling indoors like that (bang). Especially when you never produce anything worth reading.'

'Stop making that fiendish row. You'll frighten my muse and she'll fly away to Parnassus and then where'll I be?'

'Muse, my foot. Come on out and stop sulking.' (Bang, bang, bang.)

'Look, Mummy won't be at all pleased if you stove that door in.'

'Come out' (bang).

'At this point Tib would emerge and drive him away with kicks and curses, and lock himself in his room again until what Gaius called his 'poetry fit' was over. Most of what he wrote he rubbed off the tablets without even copying it out, but the little he read to me was pastoral stuff, very light and unpretentious, but less imitative than most poetry of that type, and quite pleasing, as minor poetry.'

He made me read Theocritus (I now spoke some Greek, having learnt it from Gaius's tutor) which I enjoyed im-

mensely, and we discussed him and the other pastoral poets day in, day out. Cornelia was frankly bored: 'I shouldn't have thought anybody could be interested in poems about ploughing and reaping and wine-making. Or how anybody could want to write poems about them for that matter.' We disregarded this remark as being too silly to need answering. The country round us, the terraced vines growing up elm trees, the apples, the grey olive trees, the little patches of barley, all was so beautiful that it seemed unnecessary to point the fact out to Cornelia. Tiberius and I were steeped in it: not merely the farmland but the black cypresses and ilexes, and on the other side the sea like liquid green glass, clear down to the limestone rocks beneath; the endless chatter of cicadas, so continuous one never noticed it so that when they fell silent at dusk the silence itself was like a sudden noise. Then the fireflies came out and a wholly different series of noises began. Sometimes when the night was calm so that the lamps would not blow out we dined on the terrace with fireflies dancing perpetually round us and great beetles the size of walnuts blundering against the lamps. Tiberius used sometimes to go out after the rest of us had gone to bed and roam about the country till dawn. On one of these midnight walks he lost his footing on a steeply terraced hillside and rolled over and over, landing with a thump on the roof of a peasant's house. Confused yells arose from inside: 'Help, murder, fire, thieves, witchcraft, a thunderbolt has fallen on us, a demon is coming through the roof.' Tib lay motionless on the roof, stifling his giggles with his tunic. Fortunately everyone in the house was too frightened to come out and investigate. He wrote a satire about this in the style of Horace, but tore it up afterwards.

The summer passed like this: blissful idleness, endless arguments, walks through a landscape too lovely to be true. A few of the vineyards round there belonged to small-

holders, but most of the land belonged to an old man - his name we never discovered - of incredible miserliness and immense wealth, so his slaves said. He was reputed to have been a friend of Augustus's once, but to have had a violent quarrel with him in consequence of which he left Rome, vowing never to set foot off his own estate again and had lived on in his old dilapidated villa ever since. We met him once, hobbling along with bent back, resting on a stick. We stood horror-struck for a moment, and then turned and fled, as swift as goats leaping from one terrace to another. Fortunately he was much too old to chase us himself, and the slaves he sent after us did not run very fast. We bought his fruit and milk and wine off them, paying good prices not a penny of which, I dare swear, found its way into his pocket. We trespassed rather nervously after that but just as frequently.

It was a golden summer: somehow no summer has seemed quite as happy since.

CHAPTER II

The summer drew to a close and it was time for us to return to Rome. This meant that Cornelius's clients would descend on him again 'like vultures on a corpse' he said bitterly; he always did a great turn about being desperately poor, but as far as I could make out he was no poorer than most of the senatorial families. It also meant that we would have to pay calls on Cornelius's brothers and their children to enquire how they had spent the summer and so on.

Tiberius and Cornelia briefed me carefully about the rest of the family.

'Fa has two younger brothers,' explained Tiberius, 'there's Quintus, who's utterly unremarkable except for the number of wives and mistresses he has; at present he's got the most awful wife who's ill all the time, or rather, thinks she is, and then there's Marcus the second brother. He's rather remarkable; for one thing he has bags of money, which he certainly didn't inherit, Fa got most of the money and he and Quintus started desperately poor – indeed Q. still is.' ('Desperately poor' meant he only had a household of twenty slaves and one villa.) 'Personally I suspect Marcus mopped it up big on dice, and then set up a network of pubs and crap games and probably worse all over the country.' Dice was theoretically illegal except during the Saturnalia, but there were a good many places where one could go and gamble if one knew the proprietor.

'Tib's just romancing,' put in Cornelia. 'Nobody really knows how he got his money.'

'I bet it was dice. Anyway, his son has got a set of dice which will throw three Venuses out of five.' (Venus was.

the highest throw at dice – all different – and the dog the lowest – all the same.) ‘His son – also Marcus – is even more so. All dice and drink and women, and he rackets round outside Rome in a four-horse chariot which he’s perpetually smashing up and laming the horses, I believe he deliberately crashes with some of his wild young friends to see who’ll come off worse.’ (Inarticulate protests from Cornelia, of which he firmly took no notice.) ‘However, I’m bound to say he drives jolly well. He’s always hanging round the Circus hobnobbing with the charioteers there. All the same, he’s not so bad, and he has got some code of morals where decent women are concerned, low though it is.’

‘Well, after all he’s quite young,’ argued Cornelia, only twenty. ‘Let him have his fling. He’ll sober up later on.’

‘You’re awfully fond of saying that, aren’t you? I bet he won’t. Anyway, his awfulness pales into insignificance beside Quintus’s children. His daughter – also Cornelia – really is frightful; a real Cassandra in army boots—’

‘You know the type,’ Cornelia cut in, ‘she looks like a horse and has the manners of a horse. She stumps about the place like a sergeant-major, and goes in for athletics and wears her tunic too short, and she has a brain the size of a pea.’

‘And in contrast to her, her brother – young Quintus – wears his tunic too long and his hair too long. In fact to put it crudely, he’s an absolutely roaring queer. He aspires to be an artist, and lives in the hope of finding someone fool enough to pay him to paint murals on their dining-room walls, which I should say was extremely unlikely as (a) he can’t paint at all, and (b) his ideas of what to paint are so unspeakably sordid that the bare idea of having them round one during dinner makes me feel quite sick. His mind, I assure you, is an absolute cesspit.’

Cornelia, as always, was quite ready to defend anyone Tiberius attacked. ‘It’s quite as genuine as wanting to



paint as your wanting to write poetry. Probably more so. I admit it's not exactly a profession for a gentleman—'

'That argument just won't wash,' interrupted Tib, launching out on to his pet theory. 'Nobody bothers about being a gentleman now. At least, nobody who's got any sense—'

'Implying, I suppose, that I'm a fool?'

'Shut up and listen to what I'm saying. If you consider, all the people who get anywhere now are the *petite bourgeoisie*— bringing out a Greek phrase, which annoyed Cornelia intensely — 'the freedmen and all those disgusting people who've some talent for vice and are prepared to suck up to the Div. Imp. under which last heading Quintus ought to come only he's so dam' clumsy that he'd be bound to make some awful bish and then he'd find himself out on his ear. If not worse. Then they placate the masses with bread and circuses and our class with titles that don't mean a thing (it really goes for nothing now, being a senator). And so they manage to blind everybody to the fact that the Empire is being run by a lot of dirty little Greeks.'

'I know the present Emperor is rather out to get rid of the Senate, but that doesn't argue that all future emperors will be. Probably under the next Emperor the Senate will be just as important as it always has been.'

'Well, let's face it, since the Empire started the Senate hasn't really had much to say in the running of the state. All I can say is that if I wanted to run the state, which I don't, having no wish to come to a sticky end if something goes wrong, I should be dancing attendance on the Div. Imp. instead of reading for the Bar, with the hope of ultimately getting the Senator's stripe, as a sort of pretty plaything which amuses me without having any importance attached to it whatsoever.'

'Well, all I can say is you're as bad as Quintus and Marcus. I seem to be the only sane member of the family.'

We'd better go; if we're leaving for Rome tomorrow we don't want to be late for dinner.'

That night, after making the customary sacrifices to the household Lar, Cornelius added a prayer that the journey to Rome would pass uneventfully, and that we would arrive in Rome safely. Tiberius watched with scorn, perhaps at the complex pettiness of the old religion compared to the magnificent simplicity of Christianity, perhaps at the survival of a way of life which he had pronounced doomed.

Doomed though the Lar might be, he was successful in the matter of the journey, for, apart from minor incidents, such as all the slaves getting drunk at the first stage and having to be roused next morning by Tiberius with buckets of water, it went off very well. The morning after our arrival, the vulture-like clients descended in a body, inquiring soapily how Cornelius had passed the summer. ('As if they cared,' said Tib. 'It would be much more to the point to inquire how they passed the summer without our kind patronage. Some of them look markedly thinner than when I saw them last.') They filed one by one past Cornelius, who gave them each a little purse of money, greeting them by name and asking after their wives and families. It was one of his ideas of what a gentleman should be that he should know each of his clients by name, and even something about their families, instead of having a slave to prompt him, as most people did.

Last to arrive was a very tall, dark young man in an immaculate toga, with two very excitable greyhounds on long leads, that wound themselves all round his own and everybody else's legs. I waited hopefully for the moment when one of them pulled off his toga, but somehow it stayed on. Tiberius rushed up to him at once: 'Aquila, how are you? Glad to see you haven't starved to death during the summer; you're such a skeleton I always expect

you to pop off any minute. Where on earth did you pick up those horrible beasts? I swear you didn't have them when I saw you last. Oh, by the way' – he introduced me, and explained my position briefly.

'Aquila said how d'ye do with, to my relief, no implication in his voice that he considered the situation in the least odd or unconventional. Then he turned to Tiberius again. 'Can you come to the races with me today?'

'This afternoon. My cousins'll probably come in this morning and I don't want to miss them. Who's racing for us?' 'Us' was the Greens – the party the Cornelii, and consequently all their clients, supported. There were four parties, Red, White, Green, and Blue, and there was hardly a single person in Rome who did not support one or the other of them.

'Idem, I don't know with what horses. Would Fulvia like to come too?'

'Yes, come on Fulvia. Good, well then you'll meet us here after lunch. Fine. 'Bye.'

Cornelius moved off, followed by his throng of clients, to proceed round the Forum, greeting his friends. One could gauge a person's income pretty accurately by the number of clients he had, if any, so it was necessary to show off all one's clients on every possible occasion.

'Wonderful chap, Aquila,' commented Tiberius, as soon as he was out of earshot. 'I've never seen anyone who looked quite so like a dying horse. Really, though, he's not half so inefficient and vague as he looks, and terribly nice. You might do worse than marry him except that he hasn't got a sou, as far as I can make out, except what we give him. Also I think those dogs would be rather *wearing* to live with.'

'How do you know he'd marry me, in the first place?'

'Have to, if Fa told him to. Besides, he's so good-tempered he always lets himself be shoved about by other people. If you wanted to marry him, he'd marry you, just

to be obliging. Hullo, this looks like our darling cousins in some form.'

It was a slave to give Quintus's apologies for not being able to come and see his brother that day, accompanied by young Quintus and his sister. The girl had a face of leather, without a trace of make-up, and her clothes – quite deliberately, it seemed – were exactly wrong, just as Cornelia's were exactly right. Her brother, on the other hand, had obviously taken great trouble with his clothes; he reeked of scent, and was carefully shaved in contradistinction to Tiberius who had not yet shaved his first beard.

Tiberius shook hands with them, introduced me, and asked them how they had been getting along since he had last seen them.

'Quartilla's got a four-horse chariot her father bought her,' said Cornelia. 'She lets me drive it most days.'

'Oh yes,' said Tiberius blankly. It was obvious he had no idea who Quartilla was.

'A niceish piece of workmanship,' continued Cornelia, 'with four lovely greys. The left-hand trace horse is a real pedigree animal; his sire is Victor—'

She was about to launch out into its pedigree for the past century or more when mercifully our Cornelia appeared. She greeted Quintus, kissed Quintus's Cornelia warmly on both cheeks, and started to gossip about mutual friends.

Tiberius turned to Quintus, 'Well, how is life with you? Have you found a patron yet?'

'It's all very well to sneer,' said Quintus huffily, 'the trouble is people won't recognize good art when they see it.'

'It's got nothing to do with your art. It's a matter of sucking up to people.'

'I've sucked up to people like mad, and so's Daddy. It has no effect whatsoever. They always just say they don't want my painting.'

'I don't blame them.'

'Just because it's realistic. Can't you face up to life?'

'I don't want it frescoed on my dining room walls.'

'I know you think sex is sordid, but at least it's real.'

'But there are lots of real things you wouldn't want to have frescoed on your dining room walls,' I argued. 'Like people being sick.'

Tiberius giggled slightly, but Quintus was impervious to humour.

'I don't see why not,' he said hotly, 'just because—'

At this stage a slave entered and announced Marcus. He was tall, clean-shaven with a handsome, stupid face, and dressed in a clean, perfectly draped toga. He greeted his cousins and was introduced to me.

'How are you getting on, Quintus?' he asked.

'Quintus,' explained Tiberius, 'is going to fresco his patron's dining room with pictures of people being sick.'

Marcus laughed. 'Quite appropriate, anyway.' Quintus retired, deeply hurt at this, to talk to Cornelia.

'Has he really got a patron or are you just joking?'

'Hercules, no. Not till a mule foals, as they say.'

'Well I thought it didn't seem likely. Personally I wouldn't have his paintings on my walls if he paid me for it, let alone me him.'

Quintus's Cornelia turned to Marcus. 'Tell me, what's your new team like?'

'Who said I had a new team?'

'Quartilla. She saw you driving along the Appian Way with them.'

'Who's Quartilla?'

'Friend of mine. She's got a good team of greys.'

'Oh. What does she want with a chariot?'

'Why shouldn't she have a chariot?'

There were lots of reasons Marcus could think of why a girl should not keep a chariot, but he had enough manners

to wish to avoid rowing with Cornelia in another person's house. Fortunately Quintus, remembering previous quarrels between his sister and Marcus on the same subject, came over and said it was time for them to go. Their slave was winkled out of the kitchen, where he had been drinking solidly all the time we had been talking, and they departed, neither in a very good temper.

'Friend of her's indeed,' said Marcus as soon as they were gone. 'That doesn't explain this Quartilla girl. Who is she?'

'I wouldn't know. Cornelia, who is she?'

'Her father's a Syrian freedman. Quite incredibly rich, I believe.'

'How did he get his money?' asked Marcus, who was always interested in people's income.

'Don't know.'

'It sounds most unlike a Syrian girl to be driving a chariot. Most of the Syrian girls I've known haven't been that type at all.'

Tiberius kicked him sharply on the ankle, and he decided that his reminiscences of Syrian girls were perhaps not suitable for mixed company, and changed the subject hastily. What he talked about I can't remember; judging by other conversations I had with him later, it must have been very amusing court gossip, or very boring circus gossip. He left after about a quarter of an hour, expressing his wish that I should get married soon: 'I can't think why a pretty girl like you hasn't got married long before.'

'Don't he wish he may get you,' said Tiberius, as soon as he was gone. 'I don't think he'd make a pass at you, but I should look out all the same.'

Aquila turned up soon after lunch, together with the greyhounds, which accompanied him everywhere, and we set off to the Circus. It was already packed when we got

there; we pushed through the crowd and managed to find three seats in the bottom row of wooden seats, just above the stone seats reserved for the senatorial families. There was not a race in progress and various jockeys were keeping the people amused with tricks such as riding two horses at once, jumping from one to another, picking up a handkerchief from the ground while riding full gallop and so on.

Aquila turned to the man next to him. 'Is Hermas racing next race?'

'He is. With Tuscus and Victor trace horses.' (These were the two outside horses – always stallions – who were attached simply by traces, unlike the inside horses that were harnessed firmly to the pole.) 'What'll you bet on him?'

After some haggling over the odds, Aquila and Tiberius laid 100 sesterces each, the bookie grumbling loudly that such well-dressed young gentlemen shouldn't lay more. Bets usually ran much higher than that except among the very poor; one of the attractions about the games was that betting was legal on horse racing and gladiatorial fights. Another young man, already rather drunk, in a wine-splashed toga, appeared to place a bet. He was obviously a regular, for the bookie greeted him warmly; he laid 10,000 sesterces on the Blues, and then started to pick a quarrel with Tiberius.

'That's my seat. I'd reserved it.'

'There was nothing to show you'd reserved it. Anyway, it's mine now.'

'I had reserved it. Hadn't I?' – turning suddenly on a fat bald man who was sleeping peacefully next to Tiberius.

'Ur?' said the old man sleepily.

'Hadn't I had that seat kept for me?'

'Not so far as I know. And I've been here all day,' said the man, and composed himself for sleep again.

'But I *had* reserved it,' said the young man plaintively.

At this point one of Aquila's dogs took the law into its

own hands and bit him sharply on the ankle. He departed, cursing wildly.

'I must say,' said Tiberius, 'awful though those dogs of yours are, they can be quite useful at times.'

'I like them,' said I. 'What are they called?'

'That one's Poppaea, because she's a bitch, and that one's Narcissus, because he's even worse.' Poppaea was Nero's mistress, later wife, and Narcissus one of the most notorious of his freedmen.

At this point it became obvious that the race was going to start. The trick riders cleared out of the arena, and the consul presiding over the games stood up to give the starting signal. He was an imposing figure; scarlet tunic, embroidered Tyrian toga, a wreath of heavy golden leaves on his head; in one hand an ivory rod, with an eagle on the top, in the other, the napkin to start the race. It dropped: the trumpet sounded, and the four chariots dashed out of the stalls at the end of the arena. The horses and charioteers were no less gorgeous than the consul. I picked out Hermas; in a green tunic, with a helmet on his head, and leggings round calf and thigh; whip in hand, his reins bound round his waist and a dagger in his belt to cut them if the chariot overturned. His horses were even more elaborately dressed; their tails were plaited till they stuck up in a knot, their manes were dressed with pearls; green ribbons were round their necks, with amulets strung on them (all the circus people were fanatically superstitious). The Green chariot had, by Hermas's skilful driving, secured the best position, the nearest to the bank down the middle of the arena, which had seven large wooden eggs and seven dolphins down the middle of it which were moved to show which of the seven laps of the race was in progress. I bit my knuckles in agony as Hermas neared the first turning post; a little – a very little – too far in would crash his wheel against the turning post of the bank; too far out would not only lose time but swing him into the

Red chariot creeping up behind. But the inside trace-horse – Victor, Aquila told me he was – knew his business; he checked, pivoted and the chariot swung round with barely an inch between the wheel-hub and the turning post.

The crowd was raised to a pitch of frenzy; they screamed, yelled, called on every god and goddess to support their side. Even Tiberius forgot his scorn of the old gods and prayed furiously to Fortune to help him. Hermas started well in the lead; the Red chariot crept up on him but fell back again; then the White chariot crept up, got in the lead, fell back again and finally won by a head. Yells from the crowd, some of applause, and joy as they collected their winnings, but mostly of disappointment for Hermas had been first favourite, and there had been heavy betting on him. Tiberius, who had been holding his breath over the last lap, let it out with a sigh, and tried to pretend that he cared nothing about the outcome of the race.

I was frankly much more interested in the people than the horses. There was every type there from the furious gambler, and the hard-faced muscular woman who was interested in the racing alone, and probably drove a chariot herself, to the girl on the look-out for a lover, in her best clothes, with make-up a quarter of an inch thick, and the young man with his girl, showing off his knowledge of horses, and betting high to impress her with his wealth.

Tiberius refused to bet on the next race, saying that his luck was out. Aquila persevered and was rewarded: he bet on the Blues next race and won. The race after he won again; he never bet very high but usually ended each day's racing with a fair amount of winnings. After the third race Tiberius and I left, Tiberius remarking that once you had seen one race, you had seen the lot. We bought cakes from a pastrycook's just outside the circus and ate them stickily and vulgarly all the way home.

CHAPTER III

There was a Cornelian family mansion on the Quirinal, but Cornelius had found the expense of living there too great, rented it to old Marcus, and moved to the Aventine. There he lived in the ground floor of a block of flats, which took fewer slaves to run and which he rented for about a quarter of what he got from Marcus. This insula or island was built round three sides of a courtyard with a wall across the fourth side; the ground floor was built like a house, with the slaves' quarters and kitchens on the north sides, our part of the house on the south side, and running right across the much shorter east end the dining room, painted with murals (not by Quintus) depicting the Bacchae of Euripides and furnished with couches with curved ends, a marble-topped table, and the little bronze statue of the household Lar to which sacrifice was made after every meal.

The upper floors were rented out in single rooms; the inhabitants were very poor, I should judge, but we saw little of them; the staircase to the first floor was in the slaves quarters, and the people were mostly out from dawn to dusk.

Life passed very pleasantly in Rome; Cornelia and Tiberius studied philosophy under an Alexandrian philosopher of the stoic school and Tiberius had argued his father into letting me go too. This occupied the morning; in the afternoon we might go to the games or occasionally we stayed at home, but mostly we just loafed about the city. An account of the day after our visit to the races will serve well enough to show how all our days were passed.

The philosophy class started soon after dawn and lasted

most of the morning. It was held in the philosopher's room, just off the Forum. On this day – my first day at the philosophy class – we arrived to find the other pupils already there, and Quintus, who also attended that class, in heated argument with Dionysius, the philosopher. Dionysius; although a Greek, had the highest respect for Roman customs, and insisted on his pupils turning up properly dressed in togas. Unfortunately he could not enforce this wish, and against Quintus's too-long tunic he could do nothing except make sarcastic remarks. Our arrival diverted the sarcasm on to our heads and it was not until he had exhausted all the possibilities of the 'morning after the night before' theme that he turned his attention to philosophy.

I knew something of the subject and he was a good lecturer, nevertheless my head was spinning by the time it was finished, the more so as the lecture was conducted in Greek. Dionysius questioned us to find out how much we had understood, and finally went off, by no means pleased at our answers. The class shut its tablets with one concerted bang, ran out to the Forum, sat down on the steps of the nearest temple and began arguing loudly.

There were four other people in the class besides ourselves and Quintus: the Fuscus brothers, aged seventeen and nineteen, and the Metellus Cimber brothers, Publius and Lucius, aged twenty, twins and absolutely indistinguishable. These were the only regulars although other people appeared from time to time and stayed for a few lessons. We sat on the temple steps in the warm September sun, Quintus, Cornelia and the younger Fuscus arguing about the immortality of the soul, the Metellus brothers silently eating apples they had bought off a nearby stall, and the rest of us studying our lecture notes.

'What on earth do you suppose this means?' said the elder Fuscus, after prolonged study of the little marks scratched in the wax of his tablets. 'I can't even read it.'

'Well, if 'you can't nobody can,' growled Tiberius.
'Perhaps you've got them the wrong way up,' I suggested.

Fuscus held them the other way up, looked at them critically with his head on one side and finally shut them in despair. 'I must go. Daddy said to be home before noon. The only snag being that it's impossible to get my beastly brother away from an argument.'

The beastly brother was dragged away by main force, and the two proceeded across the Forum together, quarrelling loudly and kicking each other at intervals.

'Those two do nothing but quarrel,' said Cornelia. 'It gets on my nerves. Where shall we eat today? Lunch was such a small meal that it was simpler to buy it at a stall than to go home for it; besides nobody wanted to go home with the city stretched round them, like a microcosm of the great world, where every race, Gaul, Jew, Greek, rubbed shoulders and there was always something to see in every street and alley.'

'There's a stall on the Campus Martius sells fried octopus,' suggested one of the Metelli.

'The Campus Martius be it,' said Tiberius getting up; 'I know a place here that sells quite good cheap wine too.'

We set off in a body. There was plenty to see on the way, and we stopped to watch everything: a Jew arguing with a Negro over a dirty old cloak which he protested the Negro had stolen from him, an old man in a crowded street teaching several ragged children their alphabet, with people passing between him and his pupils because the street was so narrow, an Arab with a tame viper which would stick its head into his mouth, a man selling a horse, with all the bystanders betting on the outcome, and advising the buyer freely from the depths of their ignorance.

Arrived in the Campus Martius, the first person we met was Aquila, dressed, as always, in a clean toga, and leading the greyhounds. He bought octopus and watered wine

with us, and we sat on a patch of brownish grass to eat it. I sat next to one of the Metelli; we talked together first about small things, then he started asking me about my life and I explained the situation. Finally he said calmly, as if talking about the weather, 'I don't think you're of this time at all. The future as I judge. Which would explain, because it wouldn't do if you remembered the future.'

My philosophy of life did not include people shifting from one time to another but I answered calmly. 'What makes you think that?'

'Something about the eyes. Because I'm not of this time either. Not originally.' I looked at him, but he seemed perfectly serious and sane. 'I wouldn't be telling you this if I didn't think that you were in the same situation. Don't go repeating it to everybody or they'll think I'm mad.'

'Well, what time are you off?' said I sceptically.

'Greece before the Trojan war. But also eternity, being likewise gods.'

I looked at his brother, and back to him. 'Castor and Pollux?'

'Castor and Pollux. We were all flung out of heaven about thirty years ago, with the choice of continuing on earth, ageless, and immortal except by accident or illness or of taking to some other religion and working out our own salvation like any other mortal. But the gods are scattered now: I don't know where more than about half a dozen of them are now. And Pan is dead.'

'I know that,' said I. 'But I thought one of you was always in Hades, and you're both here.'

'Pollux it was that day,' jerking his head at his brother. 'He was loosed by the same One as threw us out of Heaven. Half Hades was. We joined up again soon after we got flung out of Heaven and Hades respectively and just drifted round till about three years ago we got adopted by old Metellus Cimber and took his name and he got us commissions in the Praetorian guard. Then he died and

the Emperor bagged all his property because he didn't leave him enough money in his will. We stayed in the Guard, though I think it's only a question of time before we come unstuck. We joined this philosophy class last June because we were so sickly bored. Has its disadvantages being immortal. Especially as we don't go in for wine, women or dice much.'

I considered this carefully. I did not believe in the Gods any more than I believed in the Divine Emperor; on the other hand the Emperor certainly existed though he was not divine, and in the same way the gods might exist as people although not now divine. The theology of the argument seemed perfectly sound. On the whole the best argument seemed to be 'I believe it because it is impossible'. It could not have occurred to anyone to make up such a fantastic story.

I was interrupted in my mental argument by Quintus, who had been conducting a furious argument with Cornelia and the other Metellus – Publius he was, I discovered later, alias Pollux.

'Look, Fulyia, come and arbitrate: Metellus says you are born like you are and stay the same all your life: Cornelia says you make your soul and stay the same as how you have made it through all eternity after death, and I say there is a Platonic ideal of your soul which you're trying to imitate all your life and which you are after death. Assuming there is a life after death.'

'What are we arguing about if there isn't?' said Cornelia, who did not much see the point of abstract argument.

'I suppose there is an idea,' said I doubtfully, 'anyway I think one's whole life is an attempt to find out who or what one is.'

'You're born what you are,' argued Pollux, 'and you can't change it.'

'But circumstances can bring out certain traits in your character and suppress others,' objected Cornelia, 'so the

same person under different circumstances would become a totally different person.' Becoming aware that this sounded contradictory: 'Well, you know what I mean.'

'I think Fulyia's right,' said Castor, 'and we're each trying to conform to some idea of ourselves, I suppose existing in the mind of God. Only one little slip could put us wrong and start us drifting farther and farther away from our true selves. What do you think Cornelius?' – poking Tiberius with his toe.

Tiberius, as soon as he had finished eating had pulled a bag of draughts out of the front of his tunic, scratched a draughts-board in the dust, and was now lying on his stomach playing draughts with Aquila. He rolled over on to his side and considered the matter before replying.

'I think,' he said finally, 'that the ideal of each of us is some aspect of God and that's what each of us is trying to become. And I suppose when we're dead what is good in each of us is merged in God.'

'Yes, but what about the Platonic ideas?' protested Quintus. 'If you think that the idea of the soul is God what about the idea of say, a dog. Do you maintain that is God too?'

'Well, look. The idea of the dog is the perfect dog?'

'Yes.'

'And God is perfect, and only God is perfect?'

'How can it be otherwise, O Socrates?' – sarcastically, in Greek.

'Well, if God is the only perfect being, then the perfect dog must be God.'

'I think there's something wrong with that somewhere, but I can't think where. I give up. There's Marcus; he'd be a good antidote to this sort of argument' – at the top of his voice – 'Mar-cus.'

Marcus turned and trotted over to us, quickly but without any of the inelegance one usually associates with haste;

he had that perfection of movement that often goes with extreme stupidity.

‘Who’s coming for a spin in my chariot? Tib? Oh stop playing draughts.’ He rubbed out the improvised draughts-board with his foot, scattering the pieces.

‘I won’t. Aquila and Fulvia might.’

‘Fulvia?’

‘Yes, I think I will—’ semaphoring wildly at Aquila with my eyebrows. Fortunately he took the hint and decided to come. Castor tacked himself on to the party and we drifted off to where the chariot was kept.

The horses harnessed up, we bowled off down the Appian Way. Marcus was the sort of person who drives slightly too fast and appears to drive much more dangerously than he actually does. I did not care how dangerously he drove, I liked the speed, I liked the country we were driving through, I liked watching the horses, smooth, beautiful and obviously well-bred, and (let me confess) Marcus, equally smooth, beautiful and well-bred, and with about as much ability as one of the horses to understand anything that lay outside his immediate needs or desires.

‘Heaven!’ said Castor finally. ‘I pity my poor brother sweltering away on duty now.’

‘He’s at barracks now, is he?’ said Marcus.

‘Well, theoretically it’s me but we often double for each other. One advantage in being identical twins.’

‘Huh!’ (it is impossible to reproduce the nasal half-grunt, half-laugh that Marcus punctuated most of his remarks with). He turned round and stared first at Castor and then at me. ‘I don’t blame you.’

Castor blushed, Aquila started to giggle, and I tried to pretend that I did not understand the meaning of that remark.

‘Praetorian Guard, is that?’ continued Marcus.

‘S’right. Old Metellus got us in. I think you could go far, starting in the Praetorian Guard.’

‘Well, I d’know. Dare say you could. Huh, what the hell’s that?’

‘That’ was an ox being shod. He was between a parallel bars arrangement, hind-legs strained backwards by ropes, the front part of his body lifted off the ground by a belly band, and one foreleg bent double and lashed to one of the parallel bars. The animal tossed its head and tried to plunge in its fetters: blows, jerks of the rope holding its head and yells of ‘Arr, you brute, you,’ from all the men standing round.

‘Huh!’ said Marcus finally. ‘Jolly odd. Never knew they shod oxen before.’

‘Probably draught oxen,’ suggested Aquila, ‘that they want to take on the roads.’

‘Dare say.’ Turning round and looking at a chariot coming up the road behind us: ‘Now who – I believe that’s my dear cousin, with another of those chariot-driving girls. And she’s driving. Hmm. Hang on tight, everybody.’

He swung the chariot round and drove off towards Quinta Cornelia’s chariot. What exactly happened I cannot say: I imagine the wheels, or wheel-hubs touched. Aquila, Castor and I, in spite of Marcus’s warning, landed in a heap on the bottom of the chariot and one of the dogs fell out of the back and was nearly strangled in its own lead. The other chariot lost a wheel, and the horses completed the good work by kicking nearly everything within reach to pieces. The last we saw of them was the two girls standing amid the wreckage and using the most unedifying language at the tops of their voices.

‘She isn’t going to be frightfully pleased about her chariot. However, I dare say Dad’ll pay. I wonder if that’s her friend Quartilla.’

‘Her name is Quartilla,’ said Castor, ‘I know her brother, Giton.’

‘Their father’s a Syrian freedman, is he?’

‘Jewish. Stinking rich. His real name’s Joshua, but he

calls himself Jason. Probably if all be known, Giton started life as Jonathan or something.'

'I know the sort. Awful type. Even worse than Tib's poet-friends. Aren't a couple of those dining at your place tonight, Fulvia?'

'Persius and Lucan.

'Oh they're all right. Not like that awful crazy Jew with some awful poem by some chap called Solomon. Quite mad.'

By now we were back at the stables Marcus's father rented, just near the Appian Gate. Marcus handed the reins over to a groom. 'I suppose I'd better see you home, Fulvia. Mustn't leave you to the tender mercies of Metellus.' We wandered out of the stable yard: at the gate he turned round and yelled at the groom, 'By the way, you'd better look at the wheels and the axle. I think they might be damaged slightly.'

CHAPTER IV

Persius was the first dinner guest to arrive: he was a quiet dark young man of about twenty-five, who seemed to be perpetually laughing at everything though not unkindly. Next came a Vestal Virgin, whose name I cannot remember; she left no impression at all on me. Last to come was Lucan: it was impossible for him to leave no impression on one. He was tall and bony, and talked at the top of his voice with a strong Spanish accent. He greeted Cornelius first and then rushed up to Tiberius and Persius. 'Heavenly to see you again. How are you both? Persius, how's Cor-nutus?' This was the stoic philosopher they had both studied under. To Tiberius: 'Cornelius, you brute, you never wrote to me once the whole time I was in Athens.'

'I'm sorry; I'm hopeless at writing letters. Look, I think we're going through to dinner. Now tell us everything about Athens.'

Lucan told: he seemed to have fitted a lot into his visit to Athens besides studying literature: he discoursed at length on the seedy philosophers, the population that was interested in nothing except hearing of marvels and p - tents, the Syracusan tourist and his wife looking at the Parthenon. 'Bit bare, i'n' it?' the wife had said. 'Rather have a nice bit of painting. Like Hermas. Ever s'nice, that was.' 'When we get home,' the man, stinking of garlic and scent mixed, had promised, 'I'll do up the dining room just as good as Hermas's. Better. You see.'

This went on all through the olive and fennel stage; then, after the red mullet and scampi had been brought in, Tiberius said, 'Now I'm going to talk shop. Have you written anything good in Athens?'

'I finished off the Orpheus and Eurydice thing. You saw part of that, didn't you?'

'Just the beginning. I thought it looked as if it might turn but rather good. Can I read it?'

'I haven't got it on me. I'll send somebody round with it tomorrow morning.'

'Where are you now?'

'My uncle's place. Apropos of which, I went to see the Emperor yesterday with my uncle' – his uncle, Seneca, was Nero's ex-tutor and adviser – 'and I gather he's instituting a new cycle of games, quinquennial, Greek style 'with poetry and music contests, and he thinks I might make my first public appearance in that.'

'How sick-making,' said Tiberius; 'I do think he might give people time to calm down after his last Bacchanalia before embarking on another.'

'I don't see why you're so down on the Games,' argued Lucan. 'They don't do any harm and they do at least encourage poetry.'

'Present company excepted,' said Persius, 'there isn't any poetry to be encouraged in Rome. Poetry is like a sum in arithmetic nowadays: it's worked out according to a set formula and there's no room for anything as coarse as inspiration.'

'What you want,' said Lucan, 'is to make people sit up and listen when you read poetry at one of these recitations. It's all so smooth and polished nowadays that it just slides over people's minds without leaving any impression. You've got to break away from all the old clichés and tags and use startling and original phrases.'

'"Startling and original" is in itself a cliché,' said Tiberius, 'and it would have to be very startling indeed to make people sit up after the sort of dinner they get at these poetry readings. Anyway poetry's got to be smooth, to a certain extent: that's the very essence of verse.'

'I suppose you like all these imitative Virgils that write now,' said Lucan.

'No, indeed. After all poetry moves in cycles, like everything else. Primitive, mature, decadent. We're decadent now: for heaven's sake let's write good decadent poetry, not bad imitations of the last phase of poetry.'

'Primitive's what you want now,' said Lucan, 'rough, unpolished stuff! Make people listen.'

'Back to the Saturnian,' suggested Persius.

'My dear, it isn't in the least what *you* want. You want twisted paradoxes and far-fetched metaphors that are absolutely typical of decadence.'

'Well, what about you and your pseudo-Theocritean stuff?' demanded Lucan furiously.

'I wish you two would talk in hexameters,' said Persius, 'then I could write it all down and make the most marvellous satire out of it.'

'You could easily turn it into hexameters,' said Lucan, 'only for heaven's sake don't end off any of your hexameters "Berecynthian Attis". There was a chap studying philosophy in Athens who showed me thirty lines of what was going to be a marvellous epic and six-six - of the lines ended "Berecynthian Attis". One in five. I thought it might be some sort of gimmick but he appeared to be blandly unconscious that he'd repeated himself so often.'

'I think you could write rather a good satire on modern poetry,' said Tiberius. 'Why don't you? It isn't very much my line of country but you could do it rather well.'

'Mmm.' It was clear that he had been milling the idea over for some time. 'I might. Of course Rome nowadays is an absolute paradise for the satirist; you just can't go out of your house without seeing people behaving in a way that makes one wonder if the gods haven't affli - - - m, to put it mildly.'

'And what form of madness have you been glaying in your poems lately?' said Tiberius.

'I did a thing on the enfranchisement of citizens. Just a fragment; I'm incorporating it in a whole satire later. I've got it mapped out already but I haven't written much of it yet.'

'Read it out,' said Lucan. 'You've got it off you, I can see it, and you're longing to read it out.'

Persius fished a roll out of the front of his tunic with an embarrassed smile, unrolled it and started reading.

*O Freedom! first Delight of Humane kind!,
Not that which Bondmen from their Masters find,
The Privilege of Doles; not yet t' inscribe
Their names in this or t'other Roman Tribe;
That false Enfranchisement, with Ease is found:
Slaves are made Citizens, by turning round.
How, replies one, can any be more free?
Here's Dama, once a Groom of low decree
Not worth a Farthing and a Sot beside;
So true a Rogue, for lying's sake he ly'd;
But with a turn, a Freeman he became;
Now Marcus Dama is his Worship's Name:
Good Gods! who wou'd refuse to lend a Sum
If Wealthy Marcus Surety will become!
Marcus is made a Judge and for a Proof
Of certain Truth, He said it, is enough.
A Will is to be prov'd; put in your Claims;
'Tis clear, if Marcus has subscribed his Name.
This is true Liberty, as I believe;
What farther can we from our Caps receive,
Than as we please, without Control to live?*

'That's good,' said Lucan, when he had finished, 'dam' good. It makes mine seem like a child's jingles. Is there any more of it?'

'Nothing in the least complete. Just notes. I hope to work in a eulogy of Cornutus somewhere. It's a bit of a muddle, really.'

'You ought to eulogize Cornutus: he deserves it. There wasn't anyone as good as him at Athens, they were all awfully muddly. And they say Athens is the centre of philosophy.'

'Never mind philosophy,' said Tiberius. 'Let's get back to poetry. It's awfully interesting, Persius's thing, because it's so much more concise than most people nowadays. There's bags of stuff written now that just mumbles on saying the same thing about the same subject in a slightly different way and what's more the same thing that everybody else says! I think the essence of good poetry is saying what you want to say in the shortest possible way. Not all this verbosity that adds nothing to your knowledge of what the man's talking about.'

'Such as? I mean in the way of conciseness.'

'Oh let me see. Heraclitus for instance. "I remembered how we had talked the sun down the sky; and now somewhere you are long ago ashes".'

'Perhaps, yes. What do you think, Persius?'

Persius had got into difficulties with a large sprig of rosemary which he had eaten in a bit of kid, and which had now got stuck between two of his back teeth. He extracted it with the handle of a spoon and replied, slowly and cautiously, 'I think poetry should be fairly concise. I mean, the Heraclitus poem, any modern poet would have told you what they talked about and flung in a couple of bombastic hexameters about the sun, and extended the idea about talking the sun down the sky till the idea was worked to death. I think the real hallmark of good poetry is the air of finality about it: you feel you couldn't change a single word without wrecking the whole thing. Of course one sees that in one's own poetry – some lines seem to have been so since before the beginning of time and some lines are weak and untidy.'

'I know,' said Tiberius, 'only I find it so awfully difficult to polish up my weak lines. I always find my poems come

if I've been brooding on something for a long time and then it comes out all in a rush, and afterwards I find it almost impossible to improve the bad bits. But what gets me down is that polishing nowadays always seems to mean over-elaboration and what you want is simplicity. Besides simplicity really is a specifically civilized thing. Look at the toga as opposed to all the belts and buskins and brooches that the Gauls wear.'

'The Gauls at least are manly,' said Lucan, 'which is more than most poetry that's written nowadays is.'

'Well, saving Fulvia's presence,' said Persius, 'most poets now are hardly the types one would expect to write manly poetry.'

'And that's what you want now,' said Lucan. 'Of course it has to be polished—'

'I thought you were all against polishing,' argued Tiberius. 'That's what you said earlier this evening.'

'Oh, I give up. Pass me the figs, can you? What's your beastly cousin Marcus doing now? Still buying new chariots?'

'Need you ask? He took Fulvia out in the latest one this afternoon.'

'There were other people with us too,' I put in defensively.

'Fulvia, I didn't mean that, you know I didn't.'

'And Quintus and his horrible sister?' persisted Lucan. 'She really ought to be called Epona; she's a perfect goddess of horses, looking so like one herself. She always reminded me of the person in Horace's epode who had a bottom like a cow.'

'Yes, yes, you needn't go on,' said Tiberius hurriedly. 'We all know it.' Persius giggled worse than ever; probably the Falernian, I thought. Their talk drifted off into vaguely scandalous gossip about people I did not know.

The Vestal Virgin left fairly early and Cornelius and his wife went off to bed soon afterwards with an imploring

glance at Tiberius obviously meaning, 'Do get them out of the house as soon as possible.' I moved round and perched on the edge of Lucan's couch to listen to their conversation better instead of sitting primly on a chair as a well-behaved woman should. Lucan and Tiberius were arguing about war, each saying loudly: 'No, no, that's not my idea at all. What I said in my poem was—' Persius was muttering to himself abstractedly, and trying to write on his tablets with the point of a knife. Finally he shut them up, stowed them away in his tunic and said: 'What about those Jewish scriptures you were reading, Tib? Does there seem to be anything good in them?'

'There's rather an interesting bit very like Virgil, all about a child who shall be born and bring back justice and peace to the earth, like in the fourth eclogue. Only it's about six hundred years ago it was written.'

'Eternal idea,' said Persius. 'People always hope the age of gold is just round the corner. Just wishful thinking, I suppose.'

'But,' said Lucan triumphantly, 'nobody could have been more barbarian than the Jews six hundred years ago, so if you admire them—'

'Oh *you-u-u*—' Tiberius thrashed about despairingly with his arms and upset a jug of wine. 'Damn. Now it'll soak in and make a stain.' He dropped a cushion on top of it. 'I still maintain that civilized poetry is simple. All this bombast nowadays is just decadence.' He hiccuped loudly.

'If you're going to be sick, for Heaven's sake go out of the room. I should. What goes down must come up.'

Tiberius hiccuped again. Cornelia had already gone to bed and I decided it was time I went. The last thing I saw was Lucan sitting on the cushion on the table, a fold of his tunic resting in a puddle of wine, declaiming theatrically from Cicero's 2nd Philippic: '"Moreover, Mark Antony, remember at the marriage of Hippias you drank such a

vast amount that next day you were sick in the sight of the Roman people . . . A Master of the Horse, for whom it would have been bad enough to belch, sicking up half-digested bits, stinking of wine, down his front . . .

The other two were giggling helplessly. I only hoped there were enough slaves awake to get Lucan home in a wheelbarrow should he roll under the table. Persius, at least, seemed sober enough to get home.

CHAPTER V

Lucan managed to get home somehow that night, and next morning he sent round a copy of his *Orpheus and Eurydice* for Tiberius's criticism. Tiberius spent a happy afternoon composing an abominably rude letter about it, which ran more along the lines of, 'if it were written by the semi-literate son of a Syrian brothel-keeper I should say it was a promising attempt; as it is . . .' Admittedly it gave a very gruesome picture of Hades, and did not in the least fulfil the ideal of simplicity which he had laid down the night before. On the other hand if he wanted to 'make people sit up' he had certainly achieved his purpose. I do not think he was unduly disturbed by Tiberius's opinion of it.

It was a Monday when we came back to Rome, and it seemed months since we had left Portus Veneris when on Saturday morning Tryphaena said as she was brushing my hair, 'There will be a meeting in Aquila the tent-maker's house tomorrow. I suppose you'll be coming?'

'Yes, of course. Should I bring some bread for the Lord's supper?'

Tryphaena's mouth was full of hairpins so she could do no more than nod. She brushed my hair upwards, coiled it on the back of my head, and stuck in one by one the heavy silver pins I had borrowed from Cornelia. Her mouth free again she went on, 'I can get some bread and wine from the kitchens tomorrow morning. If you could open your mouth now. Like this.' I stretched my lips in an exaggerated grin while she painted them with wine-lees. Then she did my eyebrows and round my eyes with antimony, and painted a beauty-spot on my cheek. Then

she held up a copper mirror for me to look at the effect. I nodded approval.

‘Aquila won’t be very pleased if you go to the Lord’s Supper looking like that.’

‘I shan’t,’ said I, pulling the gold studs out of my ears and hooking in silver ear-rings, also Cornelia’s. I had only started using make-up since I returned to Rome, and Tryphaena considered it worldly (which, indeed it was) and disapproved strongly, although I did not use powder or rouge, let alone heavy creams. However, I persisted, in spite of her disapproval. I dismissed her now and went off to look for Tiberius.

‘Tryphaena and I are going to a Christian service tomorrow, would you and Cornelia be coming?’

‘Cornelia, I think not. I might. I don’t know whether the Christians’ – he always spoke to me as if I were not really a Christian myself – ‘are prepared to have me hanging round arguing and not committing myself either way indefinitely, but I want to get to the bottom of his business before I decide anything about it. Look we’d better go now, or we shall be late for our philosophy class.’

We were late, and it was not till after the lecture was over that I got a chance to talk to the twins about Christianity. Quite why I had picked on them as possible catechumens I could never decide: perhaps because they seemed almost as lost and wandering, mentally if not physically, as I had been when I turned Christian. Anyhow, I explained that I was going to the service and would they like to come, not to the Lord’s Supper of course, but they could come to the prayers and hear Aquila the tent-maker who was reputed a good preacher.

‘Will he preach on doctrine?’ said Pollux (I could tell which twin was which now when I saw them together). ‘I don’t just want to have somebody getting up and telling me how wicked I am. I know that already.’

'Didn't know you were a Christian, Fulvia,' cut in the elder Fuscus brother. 'Is Cornelius too then?'

'Not actually but he's coming to the service with me tomorrow. I think he's rather drawn towards Christianity.'

'Let's all go to the service tomorrow and heckle like mad,' suggested the younger Fuscus.

'No,' said Castor, ferociously. 'Christianity's not the sort of thing you can treat as a joke. It's serious and I think one ought to take it seriously.'

'Well, I'm not going to take it seriously to the extent of becoming Christian,' said Pollux. 'For one thing they're much too intolerant. You can't live any sort of life if you're a Christian.'

'I know they won't sacrifice to the Emperor any more than the Jew,' said the elder Fuscus, 'because Daddy had a valet once who became Christian and he had to get rid of him because he didn't want it said he had traitors in his household even though he was an awfully good valet, and honest, which is more than most of them are.'

'That's the only good thing I've ever heard about them,' said Pollux. 'After all nobody believes in emperor-worship, it's merely an extreme form of toadying to the Emperor; everyone'd like to tell him where he gets off but the Christians are the only ones who've got the nerve to do it.'

'They do it from anti-idolatrous motives,' said I, 'not treasonable ones.'

'Anyway, I'll come,' said Castor. 'A new religion is always interesting, even if there's not much to it. And I think there is to this.'

As neither of them was on duty at the relevant time it went without saying that they were both coming. They arrived at our house next morning and we set out together for Aquila's house. Cornelia, as Tiberius predicted, was not with us: I think she felt, like Pollux, that one could not live any sort of life if one was a Christian and unlike

Pollux had no confidence in her power not to get sucked in by Christianity if she went to a service again.,

The hall at Aquila's house was already full of people when we arrived. The majority of them were Jews and the rest mostly Levantines of sorts, Syrians, Greeks, Egyptians, drawn mainly from the lower classes, slaves, freedmen, small shopkeepers. There were a fair proportion of women, most of them dressed aggressively badly – neatly but in appallingly ugly clothes. I introduced the twins. Aquila nodded abstractedly and pushed them towards the back of the room so they could get out when the breaking of bread began.

Pollux was disappointed in his hope of a theological talk for Aquila spoke of the need for unity among Christians – the need to help each other in everything, 'since by our common belief we all admit ourselves men and sinners, not Greeks, Jews, slaves, freedmen, citizens or anything else. And on belief. We believe and know that the Lord Jesus, the Christ the incarnate God, died to save Man. In this belief we were all baptized, and that is all there is to believe. *Some of you*' – glaring at a group of Jews sitting in the front – 'start arguing about utterly unimportant points the moment the meeting is over. A nice frame of mind to be in after the Lord's Supper. This isn't a philosophy class' – Tiberius winked at Pollux – 'and we're not here to split theological hairs. The end is too close for us to waste time bickering about things that don't matter. We must stand firm and spread the truth,' etc etc for about half an hour. Then came the prayers: then at the words: 'Let none of the catechumens, let none of the unbaptized be present at this holy meal,' the twins and Tiberius went out and the service proper began.

They came back after the service was over, Pollux obviously prepared for a furious argument with anybody, in spite of Aquila's words; Castor undecided.

'Well?' said Aquila.

'We want to know exactly what you believe,' said Pollux, 'and forms of initiation and what not. And of course your law.'

'I've already told you what we believe this morning. And as for initiation, we don't have elaborate ceremonies like the mystery religions, nor grades: we simply have baptism, water symbolizing the washing away of sins. And within baptism we are all equal.'

'Well, define your terms then. What do you mean by son of God? Which god?'

'There is only one God.'

'Well, have it your own way. What do you mean by son then? And is He God or Man?'

'Both God and Man.'

'But that's impossible. God and Man are two completely different things. Opposites, in fact.'

'It's a matter above human reason; you just have to believe without understanding.'

'Never having belonged to any religion you wouldn't see that,' added Tiberius nastily.

'I was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries.'

'That's not a religion, that's just a form of showing off, only fit for silly women.' Here he suddenly caught sight of a Jew with a ragged grey beard hanging about outside the door, yelled, 'Oy, Simon,' and rushed off to talk to him.

'In other words,' said Pollux, turning to Aquila again, 'you think we ought to believe these things without bothering to really think whether they're right or wrong. And another thing—'

'Look here,' said Aquila, unable to bear this any longer, 'you're not in the least interested in Christianity, are you? You only want to argue. And if that's the case you'd better go away, you're not doing yourself or anybody else any good here.'

Pollux got up and slouched out, obviously most annoyed that he had failed to get a rise out of Aquila.

'I'm sorry my brother's being so frightful,' said Castor, 'do go on, I won't start arguing.'

'I'm afraid I was rather sharp with him,' said Aquila, who was in fact, as always, delighted to have had the opportunity to say something utterly devastating and quite true. 'All the same, he'll fall through over-subtlety – he's the sort of person who thinks he can set all human problems right in a day's hard thinking. Actually I'd like to go on talking to you, but I haven't the time. If you'd like to come round any evening I could talk to you then. The same applies to Cornelius if he's still interested. Well, I must be going now. Fulvia, I suppose I'll be seeing you next Sunday?' He stumped off into the back part of the house.

I went out with Castor feeling rather deflated. I seemed to have drifted very far away from the Christians during my time out of Rome: now they were strangers, and like Catullus, I both hated and loved them at once.

We found Pollux sitting on the doorstep outside rolling dice, and Tiberius talking to his disreputable Jew. Pollux got up, pushed his dice into the front of his tunic and said: 'Let's go. I have a feeling that that old so-and-so is going to come out and take a stick to me if I stay here much longer, Tiberius!' Tiberius came, saying 'O.K., tomorrow then,' over his shoulder to the Jew.

'Who the hell was that?'

'He says he's going to lend me a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures.'

'Well, I wish you joy of it. Let's go to the races. I want something to take the taste of that awful reproofing man out of my mouth.'

'Do you good to be told the truth about yourself for once,' said Castor. 'I suppose there are races this afternoon?'

'Should be. Anyway, we can go and see.'

There were, and Pollux took the taste of the awful re-

proving man out of his mouth by winning a comfortable amount of money on the first race. 'Which I mean to invest the lot in the Blues next race. Somehow I have a feeling—'

'My Gawd!' said Tiberius suddenly.

'What's the matter now?'

'Theophilus. Just over there. What's more he's seen us, and is coming over to talk to us.'

'Who's Theophilus?' said I.

'Dionysius's son,' explained Tiberius. 'He's about fourteen and I believe he knows every book of Plato by heart. And he always gives the impression of regarding everybody else as worms — sub-worms. Worst of all he has no sense of humour.'

Theophilus staked over to us, looking at us exactly as one would regard a sub-worm. 'I noticed you weren't at the philosophy class this morning. I suppose you had reasons.'

'We were studying philosophy in the great class of the world,' explained Tiberius bombastically, waving his hand towards the sweep of the arena.

'Meaning I suppose, the philosophy of horse-flesh?'

'Draw what conclusions you like. How come you were there, anyway? I thought there was nothing left your father could teach you.'

'Well, one's got to keep up with these things. It's some years now since I had it all at my finger-tips.'

'Oh, it is, is it?' There was a horrible silence; finally Theophilus said lamely, 'Well, I'd better be going now,' and moved off leaving us helpless with giggles.

And so on and so forth. Autumn drove us indoors but the crazy conversations between crazy people went on as hard as ever. Tiberius had a small room which he called his study, explaining that it was necessary to have somewhere to work; I can only conclude that his idea of work was

incessant argument, for his room was always full of people, perched anywhere on the chairs, tables, window-sills or floor that was not already covered with books, and talking at the tops of their voices. They were mostly young, and mostly Greeks or Levantines and they were going to do something marvellous, sometime, tomorrow or the next day they would start, but today was too late, today it was better to drink thin wine and eat olives and tell everybody what they were going to do. Not that anybody listened except Tiberius and the twins, who were often there too, but that did not matter since they talked for their own satisfaction. Then there were people talking about religions – Simon the Jew appeared more and more often and the Jewish scriptures joined the litter of things that covered the table and most of the chairs and overflowed on to the floor. These things represented pretty accurately the state of Tiberius's mind : a little marble Hermes with one leg missing had an Egyptian amulet slung round its neck, Homer, Æschylus and Euripides (but not Sophocles) were jumbled up with notes on the principal gods and goddesses of all religions, spells for raising the devil and the Hebrew alphabet transliterated into Greek, and a bust of Tiberius's grandfather with a small bronze censer on top of its head stared across the room at a skull sitting in a black and terra-cotta wine-bowl. His ideas changed continually, and one thing led to another : Christianity to Judaism and Judaism, via something called the Qabala Simon talked of, to strange talk of magic and demons and odd spells and diagrams learnt from white-haired Syrians and Egyptians. These he pored over for hours and correlated them with one another, though to do him justice he did not for a moment believe in any of these devils and gods and charms. Then one day I came into his room to find him stowing away all his notes on these things (he never burnt any notes on anything, however useless) all his amulets and drawings at the bottom of a chest in his room.

'Absolutely foul,' he explained, looking up and pushing back his hair with a hand that left grey streaks across his forehead. 'Dark,' smack went a pile of notes, 'and horrible,' crash went a handful of amulets, 'and evil.' He slammed the lid of the chest down and sat on it, preparing himself for a more explicit statement of the case. 'Well may their gods have beasts' heads for they're no kind of gods for humans. They have no law, only an arbitrary will, and law is the one thing that distinguishes man from the animals. All this magic – the idea that you can influence nature by charms – implies a lack of settled purpose – of law, in fact – behind the universe. Oh my God!' – he got up and stamped out, knocking over a chair *en route* and scattering the floor with half-unrolled books.

Law was his next craze and his father remarked approvingly that at last he seemed to be settling down. Volumes of Cicero and Demosthenes littered the room mixed with summaries of old cases reaching right back to Republican days, and copies of laws relating to property and contract. Officially he had been the pupil of a distinguished barrister for some time: now he really studied his cases, went and heard him speak in court, hung round his house listening to the advice he gave his clients. The various eccentrics who had crowded his rooms still came, but they could not always be certain now of finding Tiberius in and even if he was, he was usually immersed in some tattered deed of contract and answered yes and no to all remarks without making any pretence of listening. So most of them departed to find somebody else to argue with or expound their projected masterpieces to, and with them went Quintus who came to draw and departed complaining bitterly that pubs were about the only places where he could find such interesting people and there the drink was not free. Tiberius thanked heaven that he was gone and turned to his books again.

It was an abominably cold winter with the Saturnalia as

a bright splash in the middle. At least I enjoyed it; Tiberius became rather mutinous quite soon and on about the fourth day of the feast came to the Christian service with me for the first time since about the end of October – this was after a particularly riotous party in the course of which Marcus had been sick over his – Tiberius's – new dinner-dress. Aquila's house, to our relief, displayed no signs of any festivity though some of the Gentiles in the congregation – among them Castor, who came to the service fairly frequently – looked distinctly hangoverish.

Tiberius came away from this service feeling rather uncomfortable and, I think, more than half convinced of the truth of Christianity. It was about a fortnight after this that he got his first brief.

CHAPTER VI

TIBERIUS's first brief did not cause as much of a stir in his family as it should have because just about the same time Cornelia got engaged. Her fiancé commanded a cohort in the Praetorian Guard: a compact, sunburnt man of about thirty who was, as Tiberius put it, 'losing his fur a bit'; his name was Subrius Flavus. The twins knew him well: 'He's very nice, but not to marry,' said Pollux. 'He goes to sleep after dinner and snores. He is possessed of all the most unattractive virtues such as solvency, and none of the attractive vices.'

Tiberius, on being asked his opinion merely said, 'He said why didn't I get my hair cut.' Though to do Subrius justice, Tiberius had taken against him and was behaving so much like a sulky child that it was impossible to be polite to him for ever.

Cornelia said, 'Tib's just jealous because people aren't fussing over his horrid brief. He'll get over it. Anyway, everyone can't be long-haired intellectuals like him.' I think Cornelia knew that Subrius was not as intelligent as her and, in her heart of hearts, minded this terribly. But Subrius was so very eligible, and also extremely handsome, and was not 'losing his fur' to any great extent.

Tiberius's client was a rich tradesman from, I think, Venusia who had risen in the world, having started desperately poor, though free-born. I never quite followed the ins and outs but I gathered that he had divorced his wife and had therefore been obliged to return her dowry; however, since she was the guilty party, he was allowed to keep part of it back for the maintenance of his two children, and she was suing for all of it back, on the grounds that both

the children were self-supporting. The family consisted of two sons of about twenty, both in the army – centurions. The elder was in the Third Augusta, on the Sahara frontier, but the younger – a boy of about the same age as Tiberius – was stationed in Rome. He was a large, dark boy called Julian, extremely well-dressed and, unlike his father, speaking with no perceptible accent, not even an upper-class one.

It was decided that this was a suitable occasion for Tiberius to shave his first beard; his father could not afford to keep a barber, but Marcus's father offered to lend his for the occasion. Unfortunately Tiberius was extremely unco-operative and maintained that while he had no objection to shaving, and indeed had no intention of appearing in court with a shapeless tufty beard on his chin, he considered it both stupid and intellectually dishonest to put the clippings in an elaborate little box and consecrate them to some so-called god whom he hadn't believed in since he was eight and he didn't believe they had either. However, he gave in in the end, being, I think, much more conventional than he let on.

The cousins were extremely critical of his *début* into the legal profession. Marcus said, 'I can't think why you couldn't get somebody respectable like a senator, instead of a provincial tradesman.' To which Tiberius replied, 'Nobody could be more respectable than a provincial tradesman, unless by "respectable" you mean "upper-class", in which case allow me to remind you that the Senate is ninety per cent trog nowadays, you'd be hard put to it to find an upper-class person there.'

Quintus merely said that he was appalled at Tiberius's doing anything so bourgeois as taking to a regular profession. Quite whether 'bourgeois' as a term of abuse meant respectable or déclassé I could not make out.

In spite of this they turned out to see Tiberius deliver his speech when the great day arrived, together with Gaius

and a good many of old Tiberius's clients. Most of them were abominably bored and talked most of the time. Quintus had brought his tablets with him and drew continuously; his sister, who had suddenly blossomed out into a rather tarty attempt at smartness, and was wearing make-up about a quarter of an inch thick and very badly put on ('that's what comes of not being able to afford a proper maid,' said Marcus) sat rigidly still, occasionally shifting to and fro, suggesting that her stays were too tight and she wasn't used to them anyway. Marcus whiled away the time by growling at Aquila's dogs who were roused to such a pitch of frenzy by this that they had to be taken out. Gaius slid down on to the ground and started playing knuckle-bones. The opposing counsel spoke first; 'sound but second-rate' was Tiberius's dictum on him, derived from the man he was pupilling with. His style of rhetoric was florid and involved, so much so that it was not always entirely clear what he was talking about; he was also very rhythmic, so that I felt he was a living example of Longinus's warning not to make your prose of too regular a rhythm otherwise the audience will start to stamp their feet in time to your speech. Also he went up on his toes and leant over backwards when he thought he had made a good point.

Tiberius's speech, which was almost mathematical in its reasoned presentation of facts and arguments, contrasted rather well with the other, though I was somewhat afraid that the judges would be more impressed by a flow of words than by clear logic, and still more worried when, just before the end of his speech, he rose up on his toes, gave a fearful wink at us, and launched out on to a bombastic peroration in obvious parody of his opponent, becoming lost in a maze of parentheses and sawing the air with his hand like a third-rate actor. When he finally extricated himself from the parentheses and sat down, I saw he was trembling violently.

Judgment, after a long confabulation, was given in

Tiberius's favour, and the whole party returned to our place for drinks, congratulating Tiberius loudly. Arrived home they stood about singly or in small groups, looking uncomfortable and mostly silent. Only the cousins enlivened matters by going into a corner and quarrelling loudly.

Tiberius seemed to have disappeared and finally, I found him hidden behind a pillar clutching a glass of wine and still trembling from head to foot. 'My God, I do think this is an absolutely hell-inspired entertainment,' he said. 'Why couldn't Fa just have given them the price of a drink and got rid of them? Why the hell can't they go away now they've had their drinks? They can't be enjoying it any more than I am.' He peered cautiously round the pillar. 'Don't look it anyway. Nobody I want to see. None of my friends came to hear me speak of course. Moment you do a stroke of work in this city and aren't prepared to dole out free drinks all the time all your friends take themselves off.'

'Lucan was there,' said I, 'he said to congratulate like mad, and he was sorry he couldn't do it himself but he couldn't get near you, everybody else was so busy congratulating you, and he was sorry he couldn't come in afterwards and have a drink but he had to rush off and see somebody and it was frightfully important.'

'I suppose it was the Emperor, he's pushing him. How simply foul. I really must be slipping a bit if my friends find the Emperor better company than me.'

'He said he might drop in afterwards and see you.'

'That's no comfort. He'll only blah away about how marvellous the Emperor is and how he's being given a chance to recite his poems in public at last - which I should imagine is what this is all about - and so on and so forth. Oh my God.' He banged his glass down on the nearest table and rushed out.

When Lucan turned up later that day to take him out to dinner he had recovered from the strain of the morning

and was completely restored to good'humour. He returned from the dinner-party late, and finding I was still awake, came into my room to talk.

'It makes me absolutely sick,' he said slowly, sitting down on the edge of my bed, 'to see somebody – of Lucan's abilities – *prostituting* their art – for that *hog*.' No need to ask who this was. He hitched one leg up over the other to undo his sandal and went on: 'Apparently there's nothing definite but he may get a chance to show his paces at this *next* do of the Emperor's and he's thinking of writing a what's-its-name – a eulogy – of the Emperor. Which is of course absolutely loading the dice in his favour.' He shook his foot and the sandal slid to the floor with a plop. 'I'm sorry, you must be longing to get to sleep.'

'No, not in the least. Do go on, what else did he say?'

'Oh, ...thing much. He blathered away about the Emperor and how marvellous he was, the way I told you he would. It wasn't a frightfully amusing evening. Well, good night.'

It was a filthy spring: bitterly cold and the rain never seemed to stop. Cornelia's wedding was at the beginning of March and it thundered and lightened through most of the party. 'A nice way to start one's married life,' said Tiberius; however they looked radiantly happy. After the marriage they moved into the ground floor of an *insula* – not as large as ours, but quite a good size – accompanied by a dozen or so slaves who had previously been vegetating in Subrius's villa on Como – a villa he visited perhaps once a year, but had to keep on because he had inherited it from the father. I saw Cornelia quite often and she seemed to be adoring her new position as head of a household. She told me all about every one of the slaves: such a sweet little Greek girl Subrius had got to be her maid (the sweet little girl was about two years younger than she was, but Cornelia felt very aged by her new position) and Subrius's

old nurse, who was such a howling bore, but of course they couldn't get rid of her and how awful it was the cook who kept on getting drunk but Subrius refused to sell him because his father had thought him so marvellous (God knew why, except he could cook when sober) and specially told Subrius to keep him on. Moreover he could not be demoted to washing-up or something because no one else could cook and decent cooks were so expensive, they couldn't afford two. Then there was the porter's little boy who was really quite clever, she thought, and she was considering educating him and freeing him when he was about seventeen. 'Intelligent freedmen are so useful,' she said.

'Like hell they are!' said Tiberius afterwards, apropos of this remark. 'If that boy has any guts he'll find himself being useful to the Emperor before he knows where he is, and we'll all be crawling to him. Cornelia just doesn't grasp the modern world at all.'

'Why need she?' said I. 'Her life seems very pleasant and after all, lots of people get on quite well without grasping the modern world.'

'I believe you're jealous. We shall have to set about finding you a husband. Trouble is, none of my friends have any money. However if I really give my mind to it I can probably find somebody.'

'Why don't you marry me yourself if you're so keen on my getting married?'

'You're too clever. I want a sweet fluffy little wife like Lucan's – spiritually fluffy, you understand – who'll agree with everything I say. Besides, I haven't got any money either.'

'You'd get awfully bored with your fluffy wife.'

'I'd probably spend my whole time sponging on you and your husband, in search of intelligent conversation, leaving the fluffy wife at home. No, on second thoughts, I don't think I want a wife at all.'

'Don't you want to carry on the family?'

'Marcus can do that. He's the man of the future. I'm just an anachronism. Rising young barrister! What a laugh! What's the good of law when one word from *him* can, counterman even the twelve tables? I'm more in keeping with the times as starving young poet. At least that way you can live off other people without having to work for it. Which is the way most people live nowadays.'

I had heard all this too often before to pay much attention to it. I did not particularly want to be modern – perhaps because I had seen too much of Tiberius's idea of modern life before I came to Rome – and was extremely jealous of Cornelia, with the reservation that I would like somebody younger and less boring than Subrius.

About the middle of April the weather suddenly improved and it became warm enough to sit out in the courtyard. Gaius suddenly announced that he had 'got engaged', his 'fiancée' being a small plump Greek girl called Pris from 'up above', as the top floors of the insula were called, who followed Gaius through all his nefarious pursuits, utterly bewildered, with dog-like devotion. Then her brothers, who rejoiced in the names of Puppe and Cocca, took to coming and playing in the courtyard and almost immediately we had a whole gang of Greek and Syrian children from up above in and out of the courtyard almost all day. They called themselves, for reasons unknown, the Aventine Imperial Engineers and, as proof of their engineering ability, they prised up one of the flags in the yard and dug a large hole under it, into which one of the slaves fell one dark night when drunk and broke his ankle. After that they were banned the courtyard but they soon returned. One might as well have tried to keep flies out of the yard.

Cornelia was appalled by these children. They appeared one afternoon when she was sitting in the courtyard and charged round and round uttering uncouth yells. 'At least,'

she said, 'the people above us are fairly quiet; there hasn't been a fight there so far either.' Fights occasionally broke out up above, almost always in the middle of the night, usually because the police came in after one of the inhabitants. 'The only trouble is that water is always dripping through the kitchen ceiling. I sent up a slave to the people who live there to say couldn't they stop this somehow, but they just sent back to say they had to wash sometime and what did I think they could do about it? You wouldn't think it was necessary for them to empty the bowls on the floor, would you? I should say that's what they must do, judging from the amount of water that comes through.'

'It's marvellous how domesticated you've become,' said Tiberius, 'you talk of nothing else.'

'Better than talking about nothing but poets and being fearfully catty about them.'

'How can you be anything but catty about them? Look at Lucan now.' Cornelia groaned loudly.

'What about him?' I said.

'Well, he's got his chance to perform in this new festival, and he's doing his *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Just imagine. You know they say there'll be a new Emperor soon, with this comet.'

'They're always saying that. It's nothing new.'

'Well, I hope it's true this time. Tell you something else,' he added, brightening up. 'The Emperor's learning to play the bagpipes.'

'No!' said Cornelia, interested at last. 'I don't believe it. Who says?'

'Lucan. And I should think he's got it at first-hand.'

'Well, I still don't . . .' the argument was cut short by a yell from one of the upper windows. We looked up, expecting it was somebody yelling after one of Gaius's friends; instead he was yelling 'Cornelius.'

'Well I'm blowed,' said Tib, 'it's Julian.' He yelled in answer.

'How do I get down to the courtyard?' screamed Julian.

'Turn right at the bottom of the stairs and through the kitchen.'

'Pardon?'

'Right – at the bottom of the stairs and through – the – kitchen.'

'Okay.' He disappeared from the window. Cornelia turned on Tiberius. 'Isn't it bad enough having all Gaius's friends from up above rioting round here without having yours too?'

'Well, I couldn't very well say "You can't come down here" after he'd pretty well asked himself. Anyway, I shouldn't think he'll riot.'

'Pretty bumptious just to ask himself down like that, but of course I suspect that he's bumptious just because he feels awfully insecure.'

'What's he got to feel insecure about? I should have thought that nothing could be more secure than a centurion in a good legion.'

'His class, of course. He's gone a good way, but he's not exactly the sort of person one knows.'

'Much better off as he is, I should have thought.' Here Julian appeared. 'Hello, how nice to see you. I didn't know you lived here.'

'I've only just moved in.' He greeted the rest of us and sat down. 'How goes it with you? Any more brief?'

'One. It's coming up next week. How's yourself?'

'Bearing up.' There was a horrible silence. Finally Julian said, 'Were you at the races yesterday?'

'No, I hardly ever go. Why, was there a good race yesterday?'

'Smashing.' He started on a detailed account of jockeys, horses' pedigrees, etc, that was utterly incomprehensible to us all. Mercifully this was cut short by the arrival of a slave to say someone wanted to see me.

'Ask him to come out here,' I said.

'He said he wanted to see you alone, miss.'

'Okay, I'll come. Who is it?'

'Metellus Cimber was the name he gave.'

'One of the twins. I found it was Castor. I'm sorry dragging you in like this,' he said, 'but I gathered Cornelia was there, and I didn't frightfully want her to hear what I have to say.'

'Oh yes.' I waited to see what was coming next. There was a long pause while he fiddled nervously with the edge of his toga. Finally he said, 'You know I've been several times to the Christian service since you first took me.' I nodded.

'Well actually I've been seeing Aquila the tent-maker quite a lot outside those times.' Another pause. Then, 'He's been telling me about Christianity. I got rather interested, you know.' All through this he had never taken his eyes off the hem of his toga that he was playing with; now he started to pleat it carefully. After a long pause he found voice again and said, 'It seems quite a good religion, you know. Anyway, about the only religion that - that . . . Well' - he dropped the hem of his toga and looked up at me - 'what I came to say was that I'm being baptized next Sunday and I wondered if you'd like to come? I mean you started me on the Christians and I thought you ought to be in at the death, so to speak. At least . . .' he became confused and started pleating his toga hem again.

'Of course I'd love to,' said I. 'I can't say I feel myself really responsible for your conversion, it's very kind of you to suggest I am. I must say I am terribly glad. When—' There was a scuffling noise at the door and Gaius's head poked round. 'Oh, go away, do.'

'Why? Are you working up to propose to her, Metellus?' Squeaky giggles from the other side of the door.

'Oh, you demon! I suppose you've been listening to every word I've been saying, have you?'

'No. Is Fulvia going to marry you?'

'I don't know. How can I ask her with you here?'

'Fulvia, are you . . . ?'

'Scram,' said I. Gaius scrambled, remarking to the gang in a loud whisper, 'They want us to go away so that they can neck in peace.' I looked across at Castor; he was blushing furiously, but he was also laughing. 'They seem to have got it all arranged for us, haven't they?'

'Gaius is making a book on it,' I said, 'two to one that you'll propose to me some time this year and six to one that I'll take you if you do.'

'Heavens, I didn't know I'd been coming here as much as that. Is he going to have to pay out on you?'

Next morning Gaius was sitting in the courtyard with a money-bag paying out on a number of little potsherds produced by the gang labelled, 'Metellus prop.' and 'Fulvia acc.'

CHAPTER VII

There was certainly no opposition to my marriage – Tiberius's father was only too pleased not to have to pay for my keep any longer and as for his mother – 'Of course you know,' said Tiberius (I didn't know; I have always been terribly obtuse in anything relating to myself), 'that Mamma was absolutely terrified that I'd want to marry you. She wants me to marry somebody horribly rich you know, though I don't know why she thinks that her wishes have any influence over me.' Anyway, the sooner the better was the prevailing attitude so Castor started hunting round for somewhere more suitable to live than the squalid little room in the Suburra, and Tiberius's father began calculating how little drink he could provide at the reception without looking stingy, and all our disreputable friends sucking up to us in the hope of being able to get gloriously drunk at somebody else's expense.

Meantime there was Castor's baptism. He was received into the Church after service looking white and harassed, partly the result of intensive prayer that morning which had only served to depress him, partly because he had somewhat of a hangover from a party Pollux had thrown the night before to celebrate our engagement.

The marriage was fixed for the beginning of June and although two months at first seemed unbearably long to wait, they passed surprisingly quickly. Floods of people, most of them apparently complete strangers, appeared to congratulate us, ranging from Marcus who roared with laughter and said, 'When's the baby coming?' to a dark, pinched-looking girl who said with immense fervour, 'How can you bear the idea of shackling yourself to this *man*? –

the final word spoken with immense contempt. Oddly enough the Christians appeared to approve of our marriage so we had the comfort that we would at least start our married life with the blessing of the Church. Then Cornelia descended on me and gave me lots of motherly advice about how to run a house and cope with the slaves – though I felt that I should be lucky if I had even one slave to cope with – and most of all how to manage my husband. This really shocked me – ‘manage’ Castor indeed! My idea of any kind of marital disagreement was pitched battle – and since Castor and I both have shocking tempers this is the way our marriage has panned out – rather than subtle strategy on the part of the wife.

It was with quite a shock that I realized one day that our wedding was only a week ahead. This was somewhat alarming especially as Castor had still not succeeded in finding anywhere to live. He had got a fortnight’s leave after our marriage, and Tiberius’s father had offered to lend us a villa of his in Northern Italy but after that the problem remained unsolved. The remaining week seemed interminable although too short for all the things to be done – arrangements about the reception, calculations about the amount of wine required, about which it was still impossible to be accurate as most of the guests still hadn’t answered their invitation, last-minute alterations to the clothes Cornelia had lent me and which had to be let out, and perpetual spring-cleaning by the slaves. Added to this, Tiberius had a case coming on the same day as the wedding and was flitting from one part of the house to the other trying to find somewhere quiet to work.

When the great day finally came everybody was in an appalling state of jitters: I was woken before dawn by slaves banging about with brushes and buckets and got up in my clothes to find Tiberius sitting on the dining-room table, considerably discommoding the slaves who

were trying to clean the room, reciting his speech to himself in a whisper. He explained to me in agonized tones the difficulty of the case and the toughness of his opponent and finally departed to dress, yelling for his valet. Slaves preparing cakes and sweets had overflowed into the courtyard and what appeared to be absolutely all the children from 'up above' were hanging round to see if they couldn't lick out the mixing-bowls. Just before lunch Tiberius reappeared in a state of extreme despondency, having lost his case, and it did not improve his state of mind to find that his only evening clothes were completely unwearable being heavily stained with wine. The only comfort to be extracted out of the situation was that he could work off his temper on his valet, which he proceeded to do, culminating in bursting into tears of pure rage and banging his head against the nearest wall to the huge delight of all around him. Meanwhile his valet had already sent off a slave to Marcus's house who presently returned with a suit borrowed from Marcus – his second-best, but still better than Tiberius's. Tryphaena whipped me off before the end of this comedy in order to scrub me with soap and pumice stone and rags of rough sacking and scent, lace me into my stays, dress me, do my hair, paint my face and in short turn me out completely ready at least three hours before the guests were due to arrive. I went and sat very primly in Tiberius's study and read Sappho.

From the beginning the party seemed a little out of hand especially when compared to Cornelia's wedding which had been singularly unruly. Whether it was that there were more of Tiberius's friends at my wedding or that Castor's friends were more disreputable than Subrius's, or simply that Gaius's gang were not in force at Cornelia's wedding, I don't know. It can't have been the Christians. I think that towards the end of the party a good many gate-crashers infiltrated from the upper floors. Certainly

there were a lot of disreputable people putting away drink as fast as they could, whom I assumed were friends of Castor's or Tiberius's, but whom I discovered they had never seen before either. The room got very hot and very noisy and guests started drifting out into the courtyard where they were greeted by hoots and brickbats and fish-heads from up above. Nobody was particularly anxious when the moment came to move off to the bridegroom's house (Castor still hadn't got anywhere to live but had managed to borrow a house for the occasion off a fellow officer) except Tiberius's father who was worried about whether the drink was going to last out, but finally we were formed into a rather disorderly procession and set off. Gaius led the way carrying a torch. ('Do you know,' he informed us in blood-curdling tones, 'if I put this under your bed tonight, Metellus would die.') Bridesmaids brought up the rear with Castor and me somewhere in the middle surrounded by a mob of fellow officers of Castor's, hungry poets, Christians, crazy philosophers, professional spongers, highly respectable friends of Cornelia's, Gaius's gang, Tiberius's father's clients and gate-crashers from the upper floors of the insula, mostly very drunk, and all throwing nuts, singing, shouting 'Talassio', making smutty jokes, (most of which were so smutty that I couldn't understand them anyway), or even, as a lot seemed to be, just yelling their heads off.

Castor had made what was, I think, his first real mistake at this point, though I suppose he could hardly have done otherwise, by getting in a couple of jars of wine and instructing Pollux to provide drinks all round before the guests went home - 'And for heaven's sake, make sure they do go home, or at any rate get them out of the house before you go home yourself.' The guests conducted us noisily to the door of our bedroom, where the bridesmaids undressed me to my petticoat, helped me to climb into bed and then withdrew giggling. Downstairs somebody had

already opened the first jar of wine and the party was starting again with a deafening noise.

“I must have drifted off to sleep in spite of the noise of the party and the way Castor kept on edging me to the side of the bed till I nearly fell out, for I remember waking with a start to find the sky showing grey through the window, the noise of the party still continuing and Castor talking to Tiberius, who was sitting on the edge of the bed holding a small lamp.

‘But how the hell have they managed to make the drink last out this long?’ Castor was saying.

‘They haven’t. They’ve found your friend’s “cellar” and started on that.’

‘Isn’t he here?’ I said.

‘No, he’s out of Rome. He wouldn’t have lent it me otherwise. But why hasn’t my brother stopped this? I told him to get ‘em out of the house as soon as possible.’

‘Your brother – ah well, your *brother*—’ in very meaning tones.

‘What’s he up to?’

‘Well, he’s in bed.’

‘Who with? No, don’t tell me, I can guess.’

‘Who?’ I said.

‘Shut up. If you weren’t so dense you’d see for yourself.’

‘Then,’ continued Tiberius mournfully, ‘I can’t go to bed because Marcus has got some girl in my room. They were both asleep, and I couldn’t very well just charge in and turf them out, now could I? I came back here – that seemed the only thing to do – and got talking to Lucan and next thing was he passed out just like that in the middle of the most interesting conversation.’

‘Who was she?’

‘Eh? Oh, Marcus’s girl. I wouldn’t know. Never seen her in my life before. God, I feel like death.’ He dropped his head on his knees and rocked to and fro moaning. ‘I’m

going to have the most monumental hangover tomorrow.'

'It is tomorrow. Look Tiberius be an angel and see if you can't get those lunatics out of the house. There's going to be the devil to pay as it is. I can't think why they're behaving like this.'

'There's an awful lot of gate-crashers, I think. I'll do what I can, but I should think they're long past taking any notice of me. They can hardly stay after it's really light, anyway.' He tottered out, dropping lamp-oil down the front of Marcus's dinner-dress.

When I next woke the sunlight was flooding over my bed and the noise of the party had finally stopped.

The scene of the party looked fearful next morning, but closer inspection revealed that the damage was not as bad as it might have been. A lot of wine had been drunk and a lot spilled, on the floor, on the walls and even splashed up on to the ceiling, but the chief slave, with whom Castor was discussing the matter, reckoned that there was nothing he couldn't clean up or repair before his master came back. Castor tipped him substantially, promised to pay the owner the cost of the wine when he got back to Rome, and we both went, feeling thankful to have got off so lightly.

After the horrors of this party Cornelius's villa seemed doubly peaceful. It stood in the middle of a perfect Etrurian landscape: rows of elms with vines climbing over them, olives, corn, fruit trees, criss-crossed by ochre-yellow paths along which cream-coloured oxen led by dusty peasants pulled carts which seemed about to fall to bits at any moment, and over all the arc of the sky, deep blue at the zenith and fading almost to white at the horizon. Extreme happiness invested everything with an unnatural clarity: small flakes of stone peeling off a wall, or the feel of that powdery ochre-dust between my feet and my sandals, or most of all the taste of that hard, unsalted

Etrurian bread can bring back those first two weeks of my marriage as nothing else can. One golden day of complete idleness there stretched out into a lifetime, and a new lifetime started next morning with the slaves clattering about in the courtyard under our bedroom window. Imperceptibly the fortnight melted away, and it was quite a shock when one morning we got a letter from Pollux to say that he had managed to find a nice flat which he'd already moved into and he supposed Castor would be back in a day or two. Only then did we realize that Castor's leave did indeed run out in three days and it was time to be arranging about our journey back to Rome.

The flat Pollux had found was rather small and six floors up but it was clean, and in a nice neighbourhood and, most important of all, it had a good water-supply. It consisted of a large living room where Pollux slept, with a bedroom for Castor and me on one side and on the other side a little cupboard-like room in which the maid Cornelius had given me slept and where Pollux's bedding was kept during the day. I now understood the pleasure Cornelia had in running her household and certainly got as much joy out of cleaning and tidying my three rooms – or rather my two and a half rooms – with the help of my little slave-girl as ever Cornelia got out of her frescoed drawing rooms and regiments of slaves. There was not really very much to do, though, after the flat was thoroughly cleaned out: dinner we sent out for, since we had no means of cooking in the flat except over a charcoal brazier, which was abominably smoky, and lunch was an inconsiderable cold meal, almost a snack, which the twins were often not in for anyway. Mostly we lived vulgarly on tripe and sausages. The Cornelii had flitted to Portus Veneris to avoid the heat, and the philosophy class, which I could have returned to, had closed down for the summer so I soon became thoroughly bored. Then the heat set in, about the middle of July, and life became unbearable.

Every surface exuded ripples of heat: stone became too hot to touch; the pavements scorched through one's sandals. Our flat was on the top floor and the sun on the roof made it into an oven, where long scorching days were succeeded by interminable sultry nights when one rolled over and over naked on one's bed trying to find a cooler patch of sheet and only getting hotter and hotter.

Reprise from this furnace came at the beginning of August in the form of a letter from Tiberius saying couldn't I come down to Portus Veneris for August? I had some compunction about leaving Castor but he said that I had been looking ill lately and had better go, he could look after himself all right. I was pregnant by this time and feeling rather seedy from this as well as the heat. So I went: a long exhausting journey and then the arrival at the villa after dark when the family were sitting out on the terrace over dessert and Tiberius jumping up as I came into the circle of lamplight and kissing me on the cheek, saying: 'Fulvia, how marvellous to see you, you've no idea how boring it's been without you.' Writing this now brings it all back very clearly. the warmth of his breath on my cheek which was chilled by the drive through the cold air, the marvellous light and shade effects thrown on his face by the lamps, even the feel of his lips, which were sticky with peach-juice; considering the matter now, I cannot remember that he ever kissed me before, except at the wedding, not that I remember being surprised at the time. I only remember thinking how good it was to be back, and later, in bed in my usual bedroom, how good it was to hear the sea again. I can hear the sea now as I am writing this, and I go to sleep every night with the sea muttering outside my window: it is the only link between then and now.

I did not wake till well after sunrise; Tryphaena came in a bit later to see if I was awake yet and was rather sur-

prised to find that I was already dressed and had nearly finished doing my hair: indeed, I had got so used to doing without a maid since my marriage (for the girl was quite incapable of doing my hair or helping me dress in any way) that it had not occurred to me to call for her. I supposed that we would all spend the morning on the edge of the sea as we had the year before but Cornelia was five months pregnant and said she hardly thought it would be a good idea for either of us to go leaping about on those rocks (this reproof I firmly disregarded) and Gaius said that he had business to attend to, whatever that might mean, and sloped off inland with one of the cook's sons, so Tiberius and I went alone over the rocks along to the Hesperides; I had forgotten the name till Tiberius reminded me of it.

'Well, how go things in Rome?' he said, as we settled ourselves on the rocks.

'Hot,' said I. 'Maybe other things are happening besides the heat, but if so, I haven't noticed them. How are things here?'

'Boring,' said Tiberius, 'at least they have been. I haven't written anything worth speaking of and there's nobody to talk to.'

'There's nobody in Rome. Everybody's flitted and do you blame them? The heat's something awful. How's Lucan by the way?'

'He recited at this new festival and got terrific applause; everybody thought he was much better than the Emperor apparently, not that that's saying anything. God, it's hot. It can't have been hotter than this in Rome.' He stretched out his legs slowly and luxuriantly, like an animal, wriggling his toes and tensing every muscle and then sprawled on his face along a flat rock.

'It was hotter, much hotter. Did you go and hear Lucan recite?'

* Tiberius raised his chin from his hands and answered:

'I don't care for seeing my friends make fools of themselves in public.'

'Jealous,' I said.

'Not. I wouldn't do that for anything.'

'Sour grapes.' Tiberius did not deign to reply. Conversation continued by fits and starts and finally stopped altogether. I slept all afternoon and so did not see Tiberius again till dinner. Conversation was easier then, there being more people, but it was still a bit sticky. The next day was much the same: a slight feeling of constraint everywhere. The family, in which I included myself, seemed to have dissolved into its component members and no longer to act as a family.

The third day Tiberius said: 'What the hell, let's go into *Luna* for the day.' Gaius greeted this proposal with delight and Cornelia seemed pleased enough, so to *Luna* we went, and sat in a wineshop by the docks drinking cheap wine and staring at the ships.

Cornelia reckoned that this was a low form of entertainment and not particularly amusing either and refused to come again, but Tiberius and I and sometimes Gaius, went in quite often. True, it was not frightfully amusing, we knew nobody there, though we soon got to know the proprietor of the bar where we went and one or two of the regular customers, but at any rate there was a constant stream of humanity passing round us to watch, listen to and comment on. It was not Rome but it was the kind of substitute.

Life continued like that, a slow aimless passage of time, with Tiberius and me fretting on the verge of extreme boredom. Subrius appeared at the beginning of September but on being asked what the latest gossip was replied that there was no one in Rome to gossip about, thus destroying the point of his having come straight from the capital. However he brought a letter from Castor which I read and re-read for about three days before I had finally sucked

it dry. Lite continued to pass slowly and aimlessly until Rome seemed like a faint far-off dream, impossible that one would ever see again. Finally the day of our departure was fixed, the last few days dragged by, last visits to the Hesperides, to various spots up in the hills, to a bay where we fished: slaves packing up, running round getting in each other's way, leaving boxes and bundles where people were bound to trip over them, and then the day itself, waking before dawn and dressing in the bitter cold by a flickering lamp.

I arrived home the following afternoon to find the little slave-girl sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, making eyes at the pastry-cook's boy next door. She jumped up guiltily when she saw me, saying, 'Please ma'am, we didn't expect you home today, ma'am.' I augured from this that the flat had not been cleaned since I went away, which proved only too true. Everything smelt appallingly mouldy after Cornelius's villa; there was a pile of dirty dishes in one corner and two tunics, washed but still pale grey, hung over the window, completely darkening a room into which sunlight at the best of times never found its way. But Castor was there in our bedroom, lying on an unmade bed reading the *Odyssey* aloud to himself, and after he had kissed me even the cobwebs and the fact that a good deal more plaster had fallen off the ceiling didn't seem so bad.

'You look miles better,' he said, 'it's done you no end of good. Was it fun?'

'Pretty boring. How's life been with you?'

'Oh, bearing up somehow.'

'No better than that? Poor dear. Pollux about?'

'He's down at Quintus's place. Won't be back till next week.'

'Oh, Cas, darling, haven't you got a clean tunic?'

'Not till those are dry.'

'But dearest those aren't *clean*.'

*'Well, no, they aren't, are they? It's absolutely hopeless

trying to make the girl get anything clean. She won't even clean the rooms; she said she'd get 'em clean before you came back, but she obviously doesn't regard me.'

'She looked a bit horror-struck when she saw me just now.'

'Well she may. She sees it's going to catch up on her at last and she's going to be made to clean up these Augean stables.'

'It's almost simpler to do it oneself, she does whine so.'

'It is. I tried to in despair but I only succeeded in upsetting a whole bucket of water, and the people below made such awful remarks, I didn't dare try again. Thank heavens you're back again. Let's go out now and see who's about.' He started girding up his tunic and putting on his sandals. I pushed aside the damp tunics and stared out of the window to the block opposite, the one with a large crack running all down the front that was obviously going to fall down one of these days, and felt devoutly thankful that I was away from the frescoed walls, the idleness, the myriads of slaves that upper-class life entails.

CHAPTER VIII

Autumn came, it seemed, overnight, bringing with it a new flood of energy and interest in life. Most people were back in Rome already, and the rest returned in the next week or two, including Pollux, who came back late one evening only to change and dash off to a dinner-party. He seemed to spend all his evenings at parties that autumn; we hardly saw him, and perhaps it was as well for he and Castor snapped at each other, or sulked silently on the rare occasions when they met. I worried rather, wondering whether it was Castor's marriage that had upset Pollux and feeling myself responsible, but equally Pollux had some love-affair on that was annoying Castor so I really had no grounds for feeling myself particularly guilty.

That autumn was mostly parties for us too, only never the same ones as Pollux's. Also the perpetual party that had been going on in Tiberius's room last autumn had restarted, though with rather different people, Tiberius being at the moment briefless and so having turned to collecting people – more poets and fewer theologians than last year, but as eccentric as ever. Persius was there, listening to everyone, smiling gently and occasionally making notes on his tablets; Lucan talk, talk, talking about the Emperor, lauding him to the skies, to the disgust of Tiberius, who said: 'It can't last,' in the gloomy tones of one who prophesies disaster to a marriage or love-affair; even, to my surprise, Julian, Julian the centurion from 'up above', startlingly correctly dressed beside most of the others, listening very politely and saying almost nothing. Once, under direct attack, I heard him give his opinion on the gods, which was: 'I think really they're just different mani-

festations of one driving spirit belfnd the universe,' but on being asked to elucidate this he said, 'Oh, there's a lot of patter about that' and relapsed into silence. Only once did I hear him really become animated on any subject and that was when some particularly eccentric anti-military friend asked him why he was in the army, what good was it going to do? Julian produced a lot of evasive answers such as 'Someone's got to do the fighting,' but was pulled up short by, 'But what are you aiming to get out of it?' He smiled to himself and said, interested at last, 'Of course nowadays the Army's the road to position and money.'

'I thought a love-affair with the Emperor was that,' said the other. Julian was incapable of argument, being one of those people who prefer to repeat other people's opinions and theories rather than take the trouble to think up their own, so he dismissed this merely by saying, 'Oh boo.'

'Have it your own way. Personally I don't want position, I should feel my head wobbling on my shoulders. However, what are you going to do with your money and position when you've got 'em?'

Julian shrugged. 'Posh house on the Aventine - scores of slaves - three or four country-houses dotted round the place - half Apulia in your pocket - loads of lolly. Give your sons a good start in life, marry your daughters to whom you liked - what more could a man want?'

'Personally I should say a nice mistress and a' ty of amusing friends as a bare minimum.'

'Have your pick of pretty women if you had the cash. Probably of amusing people too, people always go where there's money.'

'Well, when you've made your pile let me know and I'll come along and take a free dinner off you. All the same, I don't subscribe to your philosophy of life.'

'Of course, poo: boy,' said Castor afterwards, 'like all the rest of us he's trying to find somewhere where he can

feel really secure, only, being of the class he is, he assumes that to be a member of the upper-class spells security. Whereas we, born and bred in the upper-class – what reason Castor has for supposing I was born and bred in the upper-class, God only knows – ‘know that it doesn’t.’

‘Far from it,’ I said. ‘I should have thought that his class had more security than any other nowadays.’

‘Quite. Yet here he is, sucking up to Tiberius and obviously thinking the world of himself because he’s managed to get into this sort of society. It’s silly. Or is it security he’s after?’

‘Maybe just man in search of himself, like all the rest of us.’

‘I don’t think he *is* looking for himself. That’s one of the things that makes him so different from the rest of us, he hasn’t that all-absorbing interest in himself that most of us have. Anyhow he definitely doesn’t seem one of the merry throng.’

He was not destined to be one of the merry throng for long. About a month after the above conversation he was posted out east, somewhere on the Syrian border. We never saw him again.

As autumn wore on, relations between Castor and Pollux became worse and worse. Finally, about the end of November, came the crash. It started when Castor and I came home one evening after spending the afternoon with Tiberius to find Pollux dressing for dinner.

‘Who’s dinner’s this, this evening?’ asked Castor.

‘Can’t remember. I was told but I’ve forgotten. I’m being taken by somebody.’

‘Who?’

‘Shan’t tell you, ha-ha!’

‘Well, I know anyway.’

‘Who then?’ Castor said nothing. ‘Oh, now you’re sulking. You don’t want to come to this dinner then?’

'God forbid.'

'Well, don't then. Nothing wrong in asking is there? Hercules, what's come over you? You usen't to be as disapproving as this. Oh well, I'm going. 'Seeing you.' He picked up his cloak and went.

It was late – well past midnight – when he came in, and I heard him bumping about next door, muttering to himself about his bloody brother and how he was bloody well going to tell him where he got off and bloody fool, what was he taking up this attitude for and why the bloody hell did Fulvia want to leave a whole pile of plates just where he was bound to trip over them, moreover why was there this bloody chicken-bone in his bed? (I made a mental note to attack the girl about that tomorrow.) Finally he tumbled into bed and went to sleep.

Next morning, surprisingly enough, Pollux was up and out before any of the rest of us had surfaced, so we did not see him until after lunch when Castor and I came in after a meal in a cookshop nearby. Pollux had spread out a blanket in the middle of the room and was piling all his possessions including bedding on to it.

'Well, what the blazes do you think you're doing?' said Castor.

'Packing,' said Pollux calmly. 'I'm moving out, you know.'

'No, I didn't know. Jolly for me, now I'm left to cope with the rent on my own. What's wrong anyway? This place too smelly for you?'

'You know. You and your so-called god.'

'What?' – in blank astonishment.

"The crucified One. The Nazarene. Lion of Judah, rod of Jesse," – he was working himself up into a kind of chant, the way children chant insults at each other – "begotten by the Holy Ghost in the womb of Virgin Mary, Son of Man, Prince of Peace, surely He has borne our griefs and carried our afflictions . . ." – don't look so surprised. Are

you aware that you say your prayers in a stage whisper which, when you become really fervent, is audible all over the flat? I know all about your Son of Man. Died for our salvation. Well, He can save you, if He can: I'm bloody well going to Hell rather than crawl to Him. After all I ought to know what Hell's like; I spent upwards of five hundred years there. And for your sake: don't forget that if it hadn't been for me you'd've stewed in Hell the whole time.'

'He released us from Hell,' said Castor.

'And flung us out of Heaven; don't forget that. Anyway how do we know that person – God – whatever it was had any connection with your bastard Jesus? In a hundred years' time your Jesus will be just a footnote in some theological book as the founder of some sect of Judaism that petered out for want of support; or somewhere in the legal records of Judaea province there'll be an account of the trial of Jesus of Nazareth on the charge of high treason or whatever it was. The god on the gallows! Gods don't do that sort of thing, my dear brother – although you've done nearly as bad by throwing up your divinity in order to crawl to this bastard Jew.'

Seeing that he was quite unable to provoke Castor to any retort, he changed his tone and said, 'Can I have my toga which you're wearing? Yours is in your bedroom – yours is the one with the tear on the shoulder, isn't it?' Castor nodded and silently stripped it off. Pollux put it on top of the pile, folded the edges of the blanket over the top and started cording the bundle up.

'Can you get that to wherever you're going or do you want a hand?' said Castor.

'No, it's O.K., I'm sharing a flat with someone and they've sent their man round to help me.' I looked out of the window, and there, sure enough, was the man standing at the edge of the crowded, dirty street with an extremely '*Odi profanum vulgus et arceo*' expression on his face. He

was Quintus's valet, and I understood, and wondered how I could have been so blind.

Pollux had finished cording up the bundle and pushed it out on the landing. 'I think that's all. If I've left anything behind you can tell somebody at barracks to give it to me.' He hesitated for a moment and then turned to Castor and the two kissed each other very formally on both cheeks. Then he picked up his bundle and went.

Next time we saw Pollux was about a fortnight later at a dinner-party Tiberius was giving; his father was out of Rome on business and had taken his wife with him so Tiberius had taken advantage of his absence and collected together Quintus, Marcus, Cornelia, Subrius, Persius and Lucan with their respective wives, and of course, Pollux. It went without saying that Castor and I were invited. Cornelia, it being very near the time of her confinement, left early with Subrius, but the rest of us stayed till midnight and past, till all the slaves had gone to bed long since, and the lamps were guttering out for want of oil. Persius and Lucan left before the rest, seeing that their wives were nearly asleep. 'People's wives are always a menace,' said Tiberius after they had gone. 'What about me?' I said. 'Oh you're a person in your own right, you don't count as a wife.'

The party ran much along the lines of all Tiberius's parties. People talked about themselves a great deal except for Persius's wife who talked very intelligently about modern poetry and Lucan's wife who did not talk at all. We ate little, but fairly well, and drank a great deal, and composed nasty epigrams on people and things that we didn't like; and, owing to our youth, these were many. It was Quintus who produced the biggest surprise of the evening; he ate silently till the end of dinner, not joining in the conversation at all, and then, while the servants

were clearing away the dessert, he suddenly said to Tiberius: 'I say, I never told you about my new patron, did I?'

'Patron?' said Tiberius, '*Patron?* You mean to tell me you've actually got some dam' fool to be your patron? 'Strewth.'

'Certainly I have. He's commissioned me to decorate his dining room.'

'Why?'

'Well, he seemed to like my sketches.'

'Yeah, I heard about that,' said Marcus.

'Heard about what?'

'Oh, your having a patron and that. I like the way you say new patron, by the way, as if you'd had dozens of others before.'

'And who, if I may enquire,' said Castor icily, 'is being fool enough to employ a b-b—' he bit off the word in time, and went on 'person like you to paint their walls?'

'He's a Syrian—'

'Well, of course, that explains it,' interjected Castor.

'—very rich, with the most marvellous house on the Caelian — no expense spared, you know—'

'So of course no expense is spared in getting the best artist of the day,' said Tiberius.

'Thank you, I'm glad my merit is recognised even among my own family. (You wait though, I'll surprise you all one of these days.) Yes, lavish beyond belief. And *warm*. Not like this place. Central heating everywhere, even in the lav.'

'Oh, this is too good to be true,' said Lucan.

'Why don't you fresco the loo,' said Castor. 'Add the finishing touch. I'm sure paintings on lavatory walls would be very much your style.' I began to fear that there was going to be a blow-up between him and Quintus, but fortunately Quintus was sidetracked into a noisy argument

with Tiberius on the merits and demerits of Syrian freed-men.

Marcus took advantage of his being absorbed to say quietly to me, 'Of course, you know why he's got this job?'

'No, why?'

Marcus lowered his voice even more. 'Well, the fact is, not to put too fine a point on it, that he goes to bed with the chap.'

'But, but – do you mean to say—' began Castor flabbergasted, but obviously delighted to have a new piece of evidence against Quintus, 'I mean dammit, it's not a frightfully good idea to have two lovers at once. I mean, is he fond of this man, or what? I don't see.'

'I see his point,' put in Lucan from the other side of Marcus. 'One will go to almost any lengths to give one's art a ~~showing~~.'

'What, do you go to bed with the Emperor then?' said Marcus.

'What was that you said?' raising a jug of wine menacingly above Marcus's head.

'All right, all right, I take that back, everybody knows that your virtue is unimpeachable. No, look, honestly this dinner-dress is new, do take care.' Lucan replaced the jug on the table.

'I must say I am absolutely horrified,' continued Castor. 'It's just prostitution, pure and simple. He's just as much a tart as any girl in the lowest brothel in the ~~suburra~~. Oh, my God!'

'Do keep your voice or Quintus'll hear. I dae say it is prostitution, but are most people much better nowadays? Rome's full of rich women, quite good family some of them, who'll go to bed with you for the asking.'

'Yes, but that's different from going to bed with someone whom you probably don't like in the least just ~~for~~ what you're going to get out of them.'

'Sort of you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.'

'More like,' suggested Marcus, 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch your —'

'Honestly, my dear Marcus,' said Castor, 'do consider that Fulvia's here.'

'Don't mind me,' I said. 'I hear lots of that sort of remarks from Castor's friends.'

The conversation was here interrupted by Tiberius demanding Lucan's help to compose a satire on rich Syrians, and talk turned to epigrams again, Tiberius, Persius and Lucan wrestling with the scansion, with the rest of us making suggestions that grew broader and broader, especially Marcus's, with the amount of wine consumed.

Cornelia had already left and soon after midnight first Lucan and then Persius left. The rest of us began to make half-hearted remarks about leaving to give Tiberius a chance to get rid of us if he wanted, but Tib remarked quite firmly, 'You must none of you go until you're absolutely too drunk or too sleepy to remain conscious a minute longer. In which case you won't be in a condition to go at all. Anyway you can't go now.' Thus reassured, we got the butler to bring another cask of wine up from the cellar, and then told him that he and the other slaves could go to bed. Freed from the restriction of wives being present — I evidently didn't count — conversation took a distinctly smutty turn. Quintus was prevailed upon by Pollux to get up on the table and give his celebrated imitation of the dancing-girl in some pub that they frequented; I will say this for him, that it was extremely funny, as well as vulgar. When he returned to his couch next to Pollux, Pollux flung a cloak he was wearing over both of them, and I saw him stroking Quintus's thighs under it. Castor kept his eyes averted all through this performance and occupied himself with spitting wine at the face of Dionysus on the wall behind us. Marcus took up this game, but spitting at a different part of him. By the end of the party the

wall was splashed all over with wine. It proved impossible to get out and Tiberius's father never forgave.

Cornelia's baby was born a week after this dinner party. Castor predicted that it would turn out a girl and a budding prostitute, after the conversation it had heard in the womb, but it was a boy – a little bald purple thing tightly swaddled that I was allowed to hold carefully, gazing in awe at it and thinking of the child I could feel kicking in my womb. Cornelia behaved like a respectable upper-class mother, took to her bed for a month and handed over the child to a wet-nurse as soon as it was born. I was frankly horrified that anyone should not want to suckle their own baby, but Cornelia said that wet-nurses were the done thing and that was that.

The next excitement was an invitation to dinner from Quintus's patron. It seems that Ascyltos – that was his name – was giving a party so that people could see Quintus's frescoes, as far as they had got. I had a hard job persuading Castor to go; first of all he said he didn't want me to go either, then he said that Tiberius, who was also going, could take me. Finally I succeeded with the argument that if he didn't go and see Quintus's paintings he couldn't convincingly tell everybody else how awful they were, so when the day came he put on his evening clothes and we went off together to Ascyltos's house on the Caelian.

We were let in by a porter who was considerably more smartly dressed than Castor. A raucous voice screamed, 'Good evening, you're welcome,' and we looked round to see who this was, but it was only a magpie hanging in a golden cage. The porter led us through to an ante-chamber where we were taken over by six small boys, who removed our sandals, washed our hands and feet and even, which rather disgusted me, clipped our toe-nails. They were all dressed alike and like a team of horses, perfectly matched

in size and colouring. Then they put on our sandals again, showed us into the dining room and there abandoned us. The dining room was crammed with guests and we stared round helplessly, wondering what to do, since Quintus did not appear to be there at all, but suddenly we saw Tiberius signalling to us from the other side of the room. We pushed our way round the room, and settled ourselves on the couch next to the one that he was sharing with Marcus and – surprisingly enough – Aquila, complete with greyhounds.

'Heavens, what a squash! I thought we'd never see anyone we knew,' said I. 'Where's our host?'

'Not here,' said Tiberius.

'Oh. Are any of the rest of the family here?'

'Ma and Pa wouldn't come, they thought the whole thing too low for words. Uncle Marcus had something else on, Quintus's pa and stepma are here, so's his sister – they're somewhere about though I can't see 'em 't the moment. Cornelia's still too ill.'

'D'you mean to tell me it takes that long to recover from a baby?' said Marcus. 'Oh well, perhaps it does. I wouldn't know.'

'No, you always clear out before the baby comes along.'

'All I can say,' said Castor, 'is if Fulvia's going to be laid up for a month after the baby's born, I'm going to be living in an absolute pigsty by the end of it.'

'We can probably lend you somebody to help during that time,' said Tiberius. 'What do you think of the paintings, Fulvia, as far as they've got?'

Mostly they had just got to the stage of the figures being blocked out in sanguine; the only completely finished group was one which I took to be Zeus and Semele, in which a naked Zeus, beardless and strangely young-looking, stood in a blaze of glory before a cowering Semele with hennaed hair and an over-painted face whose clothes

were going up in flames which matched Zeus's aureole, and whose lower half was already scorched black.

'Not so bad really, in fact I rather like it in a way.'

'Thank you,' said a voice behind me. I looked round and there was Quintus - Quintus dressed in a short pale-green silk tunic embroidered with multi-coloured flowers, and girt low on the hips with a pink sash.

'Strewth,' said Castor, 'is it necessary to dress like a prostitute too?'

'The Emperor's got one like this,' said Quintus.

'That proves our point,' said Tiberius. 'Likewise, why must you tie your sash as if you were pregnant?'

Marcus contented himself by snapping out, 'Haircut, Legionary Cornelius.'

'When you're quite finished . . . Anyway you like Zeus and Semele?'

'Oh, it ~~is~~ that, is it?' I said. 'Why's Zeus so young-looking?'

'It expresses the power of love better.'

'Oh,' said I, wondering what this might mean. 'Your family all well?'

'Oh yes, fine. You heard about my sister?'

'No, what?'

'She's got engaged to a chap called Giton - a sort of tough, chariot-driving type brother of that ghastly girl Quartilla and son of Jason the Syrian.' He was here seized by another guest. 'My dear, hul-lo, how *hea*-venly to see you.' They moved off, talking.

'That family goes from bad to worse,' said Marcus, 'all these dirty Syrians.'

'It's not frightfully polite to make remarks like that about people who ask you to dinner,' said Tiberius. 'Nor about members of your own family.'

'Well, all I can say is - hullo here is the old *bastard* himself.' Ascylos was carried in, propped up on scarlet cushions in a dinner-dress almost as frightful as Quintus's.

He was set down at the head of the table, with Quintus beside him. Hors d'oeuvres began to circulate in enormous chased silver and gold dishes. It was obviously going to be one of those dinners where there would be far too much – twice or three times too much – food for the guests to be able to eat. I saw many of them stowing away olives and quails in their napkins.

The next dish – kid with capons' breasts in the shape of sea-horses with lettuces for tails – was brought in and our glasses filled again. More food being put into napkins – Aquila gave his dogs a sea-horse each and hid another one in his napkin. In the middle of this course Tiberius suddenly got off his couch and slipped out of the room. He reappeared a few minutes later obviously hugely amused.

'I've just been investigating some of Quintus's statements about this place.'

'Which?' said I.

'About the centrally-heated loo. It's perfectly true – it's far warmer than we can ever get anywhere at home at this time of year. Also it's got a tessellated pavement, depicting whatsisname dragging Hector round the walls of Troy.'

'God, how marvellous,' said Marcus. 'How like you to go buzzing off in the middle of a meal just to confirm a report that the loo is centrally heated.'

At this point conversation was stopped by our host banging on the table with a knife-handle. He grinned greasily at the guests. 'Everybody listening?' He had a harsh but not very strong accent, and lisped his r's, a trick which I had noticed in Quintus lately. 'Right! Now I got something to show you.' I wondered if this might be some more of Quintus's work but no, 'it was made me by an Egyptian slave of mine, very clever man. You' – with sudden vehemence that made me jump, pointing with a forefinger which wore a large gold ring and a little wrought-silver ring on the top joint – 'come up here.' A

small dark man came up to the head of the table and started fiddling with something under the table. 'Now everybody watch the middle of the table.' We watched intently and a miniature temple appeared bit by bit with a little Venus inside it about eighteen inches high. 'Ah! Now this you see, is very beautiful, is copy of the Venus of Praxiteles.' Quintus groaned and hid his face in his hand, and Tiberius remarked in a clearly audible whisper, 'That's not the Venus of Praxiteles.'

'Now wait! Something else goin' to happen.' There was a few seconds pause while the Egyptian fiddled under the table, and then the statue started to spray heavy rose scent out of tiny holes all over it. Ascytlos watched it, delighted. 'Ha. You like it? Now I show you something else.' (My God is the thing going to do a dance now?' said Castor.) More fiddling under the table and the spray grew weaker and then stopped altogether while another spray started, presumably out of different holes, jasmine this time. The effect of the two together was simply appalling. Finally the jasmine scent stopped too and Ascytlos looked round for applause. 'Well, do you like it? This is the first time I showed it to anybody.' All the guests assured him they thought it was marvellous. He turned to Quintus, 'What do you think of it?'

'I suppose it's quite an amusing *toy*,' said Quintus cishingly. He was obviously feeling as queasy as I was from the smell. Ascytlos was evidently pleased with this answer. He turned to the Egyptian. 'Okay, I like it, you've done it very well, you've done other good jobs for me! Now you're a free man. No, don't thank me, thank the gods who gave you a turn for this sort of thing.' The Egyptian retired, thanking him profusely and leaving him to play with his new toy. He turned it on and off several times during dinner and finally got it stuck with both sprays going full blast. The Egyptian could not be found and the thing had to be left on until all the scent was exhausted.

The party droned on and on, course after course, until I was completely glutted and rather tight. Everybody seemed to have utterly forgotten – if they ever knew – that the party was in Quintus's honour and Quintus himself had got completely bored and had fished a piece of charcoal out of the front of his tunic and was drawing on the table in front of him, when Ascyltos suddenly produced, in much the same way as he had produced the scent squirting affair, a number of Quintus's drawings which were passed round the guests for approbation. There were cartoons for the four walls of the room – the gods in small arbours supported by slender columns or in open-fronted rooms, half-hidden by a looped-up curtain; there was no kind of uniformity in the places occupied by the pairs of lovers spaced at intervals round the walls, all rather unreal, but in the background was Rome, Rome from the rich man perambulating the Forum with a crowd of clients, to the rickety tenements of the Suburra, its streets thronged with a noisy dirty cosmopolitan crowd. Then there were some studies – some, fairly academic ones, of the gods themselves, but mostly of people in the background, utterly and squalidly realistic. There were also a few completely unrelated drawings, quick fantastic sketches; two I particularly remember: in one two young men lay in each other's arms while a huge dragon-like animal was slowly devouring them from the feet upwards; in the other was a man lying on top of a girl looking down on her with an expression of idiotic contentment, with two small black snakes emerging from their breasts and fighting. Castor merely glanced at them, as had most of the other guests, and pushed them on to me, remarking, 'Product of a diseased mind, I should say.'

Tiberius studied them carefully and finally said, 'Actually they're not half as bad as I thought they'd be. His drawing's improved a lot in the past year. I wonder who's been teaching him? What's more, you know, this is abso-

lutely razor-edged satire on modern love, by a complete cynic who doesn't believe in love at all.'

'Surely satire presupposes existence of some standard which the object of the satire doesn't live up to,' I said. 'I should have thought that what he was so bitter about was that the modern love-affair has no connection with love, just lust. Besides, remember what he said earlier this evening about the power of love.'

'You may be right. In fact' – he glanced up at the figures of Zeus and Semele – 'I think it is love simply. Not Jupiter and Semele at all, just Eros and the prostitute, as it were. Love rebuking Lust.' Aquila held out his hand for the drawings and he passed them on. 'I think really he hates the world as it is.'

'Don't we all?'

'Do we? I don't think I do. It's an awful world of course. very mad and bad, but you can't do anything about it and I dare say the amount of evil in the world is always the same only just in different spheres of life. Anyway it's no good being angry about it, that won't stop the evil. One wonders, can anything? Anyway I wouldn't like to live in any other age, would you?'

'No, I don't really think so.' I suddenly started thinking of Castor's words – 'not of this time at all . . . I think probably of the future . . . something about the eyes – and wondering if this were really so – ' was half inclined to think it was – and whether the world I was born in was also mad and bad and full of young people raging powerlessly against the whole crazy set-up.

The latter part of the party remains very hazy, not because I was drunk but because I was abominably sleepy. I know that everybody else got very tight and a monkey was brought in which one of Aquila's dogs bit in the foot and Quintus became so fed-up that he fell asleep and snored loudly and we were all given little presents; Castor

threw this away and insisted on my doing the same. Finally we made good our escape.

Sat in the street Marcus said, 'It's no good going to bed now, let's make a night of it - go and drink somewhere . . .'

Tiberius was ready for anything so long as it might be amusing, I had been woken up by the cold air and had now got my second wind, and so did not feel in the least like going to bed. Castor was willing if I was and Aquila was always ready to fall in with other people's plans. Marcus suggested the Two Cocks down by the river. That was agreed. 'Right,' said Marcus, 'I'll meet you there,' and bolted into a side-alley just in time.

When we got to the Two Cocks Marcus was not there. He arrived about five minutes later with three very drunken men who were all absorbed in trying to dress him, his clothes having evidently fallen off *en route*. Finally, having managed to make him decent, if not very presentable, we went into the pub.

The pub was empty except for two or three tarts looking for customers and the proprietor himself. We ordered a bottle of wine, drove away the tarts and sat down at one of the dirty wooden tables. Marcus talked about horses to the three other men, who consisted of a negro, a large fairish man and a little dark curly-haired man with a scar on one cheek. This last I felt sure I had seen before; Tiberius felt the same and finally asked Marcus:

'Felix of the Greens,' said Marcus.

'Chariot driver?'

'Yeah. Goin' to get him to give me a job.' In accordance with this plan, when Felix's party left for another pub, he followed them, remarking to Tiberius, 'Going to see he takes me on for the Greens. Very distinguished, catch a real live chariot driver. Just walking down the Via Lata he was and I crept up behind him with my cloak and then pounced. Never knew what hit him.'

The next pub was just the same, the same cheap wine,

the same tarts, the same dirty rough wooden tables. Tiberius immediately sat down and started to write a poem to the huge amusement of Marcus and Felix. I started capping quotations from Theocritus with the fair man. We stayed there until the proprietor finally drove us out. Outside it was still pitch-black but the smell was that of early morning not night and small boys were going to school with their tablets under their arms. Marcus bade farewell to Felix's party with loving embraces and shrieks of 'Goodbye you old bugger.' We dragged him away forcibly and frogs-marched him off. After a few yards he passed out completely and we had to carry him home and fling him into bed, and only then go back to the flat and creep into our own beds, the dawn already showing grey in the sky.

CHAPTER IX

What happened that winter besides those two riotous dinner-parties? I'm not certain I really remember, at any rate as regards actual events, though the flavour of that autumn is completely distinct in my mind if flavour be the right word, and not colour or smell. It had a totally different character attached to it from any before or after, as numbers and names do. The world I had known was disintegrating, and a new world solidifying, a process that happens in a greater or less degree every autumn, but this autumn in a much greater degree. A world, the first world I can remember had crystallized round me last year in September when Tiberius's family had returned to Rome, a small almost cliquey circle of the family of Persius and Lucan and Aquila and the twins, a circle at times discordant but presenting a united front to the outside world. Now each member of it had gone off at a tangent, singly or in twos or threes, each now hardened in his own life. Maybe we had simply grown up over the past year; anyway the circle was broken.

It reunited later, part of it at all events, but that was under the pressure of outside events, not spontaneously. That autumn, though, everyone was trying, as the idiotic phrase goes, 'to live his own life' – a perfectly meaningless phrase in fact, since one's life is never entirely one's own: my life belonged largely to Castor, and, when it was born, to the baby, but partly to Tiberius too. Tiberius's life was divided between his fellow poets and his clients – a flood of clients started at the beginning of December, he seemed to be gaining a reputation in a small way – and of Castor's life part, an ever-increasing part, belonged to me, but most

of it belonged to the exiled court of Zeus and to Pollux, though he had lost the one through his baptism, the other through his brother's love for Quintus. The major part of his life, the first thousand years, had been cut away, much as the first seventeen years of mine had been. But I had lost my former life completely and been able to start afresh: Castor had the memory of his lost life always before him, and remained crippled, like a man who has lost an arm or leg. Later his relations with Pollux got nearer their old footing, and he could even speak to Quintus in a friendly manner. That autumn, though, he was intent on 'living his own life', as we all were, following different courses that sooner or later were bound to clash – as they did, at that terrible Saturnalia, and that still more terrible wedding of Quintus's sister.

The Saturnalia started very well, there were terrific parties at Tiberius's father's house, all the family and mobs of slaves and clients so that Castor and Pollux hardly had to speak to each other. The trouble began on the second day of the festivities when Quintus said to Tiberius that tomorrow morning he was going over to Ascyltos's to do some more painting. 'After such a party as I should think they're having there now I don't suppose anybody'll be awake till lunch-time, so I shall be able to do some work without a lot of nitwits breathing down the back of my neck and making fatuous suggestions.'

'May I come and watch?' said Tiberius. 'I promise I won't breathe down the back of your neck or make fatuous suggestions.'

'Come if you like.'

'Can I then?' I said. 'I'd like to see how you're getting on.'

'Okay then, let everybody come. Bring the wife and kiddies and make a real day of it. I must go now or I shall be much too dead to do any decent work tomorrow.'

'But you can't really want to go,' said Castor when I

told him this afterwards. 'His paintings are absolutely lousy. You can't possibly want to see them again.'

'Actually I do. I rather like them. Anyway, you're not exactly an impartial critic, are you?' Silence. 'Well I won't go if you really mind.'

'No, I don't, by all means go if you like.' I could see he did, but also saw that in his present frame of mind he would be better pleased if I went, thus giving him further material to sulk about, than if I stayed at home, selfishly unselfish, putting on a martyred expression and making him feel that he was in the wrong for a change. So I went with Tiberius, leaving him at home to go over all his grievances, fish up some old ones and polish them up, and even perhaps invent some totally new and very fine ones; in short, to work himself up into a fine old temper. I sympathized, and saw no reason to spoil his grievances by being nice to him, especially as I knew it would only enrage him more.

At Ascyltos's we were let in by a slave who had only just got out of bed, barefooted, and in a crumpled under-tunic. The moment he had let us in he padded back to bed again. Everybody else was still asleep, even the magpie. We went through to the dining room and found Quintus standing on a short step-ladder painting Mars and Venus. The floor round him was littered with little saucers of paint and there was a large smear of green across the seat of his tunic. He was painting Venus's hair as we came in, deep gold hair not inclining to brown or copper, just dark gold, twenty carat, soft and heavy. We sat on the edge of the table and watched. Finally he said, 'Hand me up the Indian blue, can you?' I picked up one of the saucers. 'No, not that, stoopid, that's Armenian blue. By your foot. No, your other foot, the left one. No, right. Yes, that's the one. At last. Give it here.'

'What's that for?' said Tiberius.

'Shadows,' said Quintus.

'What, blue in fair hair?'

'Didn't you say you weren't going to make fatuous remarks?'

Tiberius was silent and we watched the painting. The indigo, mixed with other colours, did in fact produce perfect shadows. Castor, I reflected, had just such dark gold hair with just such shadows in it. Then I remembered that Pollux had too.

Quintus finished the hair, then, forgetting where he was, took a step backwards to admire the effect, and landed crash on the floor. He picked himself up and sat down beside me, transferring a good smudge of green from his bottom to the table. We could now see the picture properly: Venus sitting naked with her hair over her shoulders Mars kneeling beside her, his cloak falling behind him leaving his body bare, his arms round Venus's body, his cheek pressed against her side in such a way that it seemed that his cheekbone must be hard against her hip bone - abominably uncomfortable for both - his eyes shut and an expression of idiotic content on his face. Venus was stroking his hair in an absent-minded way with one hand but her whole attention was turned to trying to catch a fly buzzing against the wall. Seeing she was trying with her left hand I didn't think she had much hope of actually getting it, but at least it was more interesting than Mars. As a satire on modern love the picture delighted me, but I felt that Ascylos was not going to be so pleased.

'So heavenly to be able to work when the old b's not about,' said Quintus. 'He comes snooping round criticizing everything. He doesn't know a thing about art, of course, but he likes to think he does, so he comes round telling me how I ought to paint. He doesn't go into the kitchen and tell his slaves how they ought to cook, now does he? Yet he comes round, telling me what colour to use and where to place my figures. What he wants is fearful glossy

academic stuff, the sort of stuff that may once have been good, but which's now been reduced to a formula and is turned out by the million on wine-jars and mixing-bowls all over the empire. Well, why can't he hire people who do paint wine-jars if that's the sort of stuff he wants? He said the other day why couldn't I paint like Rufus of Syracuse? You know who I mean. Well, I ask you, the poor old chap's about seventy and hasn't changed his technique for about forty years, it's lost any significance for us, his sort of stuff, just decorative, that's all, not what you'd call art. And he said to me – Ascytus, I mean – what he really liked in a picture was when it looked as if it went right back into the wall, so's it seemed you could walk into it. Next thing he'll be wanting me to do a *trompe l'oeil* staircase somewhere. Oh yes, and he said he liked it to look real. Well, I'm giving him real life all right, and I bet he won't like it. Of course he doesn't want it to look real, he wants it to look like a picture, not even a picture drawn from life, a picture about three removes from reality. Well, what can you do with a person like that?

Castor and I arrived quite late at Cornelius's party that evening. Quintus and Pollux were nowhere to be seen and I hoped that they had gone to Ascytus's party and would not come at all. Quintus's father and stepmother were there however, his stepmother swam up to Tiberius who was talking to me in one corner of the room. 'You haven't seen Quintus, have you?' She was a small, over-rouged woman whose one relaxation was suffering from an incredible variety of illnesses. These were believed by all the family to be completely imaginary, but in that we may have been wronging her.

'Sorry, no,' said Tiberius. 'He was painting at Ascytus's this morning but I haven't seen him since.'

'Oh dear. So tahsome the way they do these things. I always tell his father he ought to stop him behaving in such an unsuitable way, but he says he believes in giving

the boy some freedom. Really, the strain on one's nerves! I'm sure I couldn't worry more about Quintus if he were my own son.' She was perhaps five years older than Quintus. 'If only he would live at home. I'm sure he doesn't get enough to eat. Now if only I had a stepson like you, Tiberius.' She wandered away with a nobody-knows-how-much-I-suffer smile on her face.

'I knew a man once,' said Marcus, who had joined us in the course of this conversation, 'who did his stepmother in. She was an awful little tart anyway. His father was pro-consul in Syria and when he came back he had this wog girl in tow. Dad didn't much like my knowing this man after that; of course his friends only commit respectable crimes.'

'What do you mean by respectable crimes?' I asked, fascinated by this classification of crime.

'Oh, you know. Anyway he hit her over the head with a hatchet.'

'Didn't his father cut up rough about this?' said Tiberius.

'Oh, I think he was getting pretty sick of the woman by that time. She spoke no Latin and precious little Greek. Anyway, soon after he married a nice rich widow, so it all ended okay.'

'What happened to the son?'

'I forget. Oh yes, he was acquitted. But everybody knew he'd done it of course.'

I noticed that Castor had disappeared and began to get rather worried. Finally I spotted him drinking hard at the other end of the room. He had a hard head and knew where to stop with liquor; moreover Quintus and Pollux still hadn't arrived so I felt there was no need to worry.

'How's Lucius this evening?' said Tiberius.

'Eh?' It always gave me a bit of a jolt to hear Castor referred to by this name. 'Oh, he's like a bear with a sore head. He's been feeding his temper and grooming it and getting it ready all day and now it's in fine trim. With any

luck he'll work it off by throwing plates at me when we get home this evening.'

'What, those silver plates Papa gave you the day before yesterday?'

'Good grief, no. We're keeping those to flog, so's we can replaster the ceiling. No, just any old plates, he'll hurl them at me yelling blue murder and I'll hurl them back, not hitting each other of course, but bringing a lot more plaster down. And all the other people will wake up and holler, and say why can't we got to sleep like respectable people. It happens from time to time, though mostly I'm the one who throws plates. No, what I'm terrified of is that he'll start a scene here.'

This was in fact what happened. I suppose sooner or later a showdown between the twins was inevitable, perhaps even a good thing, but it needn't have happened at a party, nor so violently. I did not see Quintus and Pollux arrive, nor did I see how the quarrel started; the first I knew of it was hearing a loud yell from the other end of the room and elbowing my way over I found Castor and Pollux rolling over and over on the floor in a kind of pancration, abusing each other in Greek— Homeric Greek it sounded. Quintus was dancing round them trying to help Pollux; finally he managed to biff Castor rather ineffectively over the head with a full wine jug: the wine spread all over the floor, giving the whole thing the most horribly sanguinary appearance. I dared not interfere, not wanting to get a kick in the belly which would finish off the child and most probably me too. Marcus and Tiberius managed to drag them apart, after a bit of a struggle. They were a fearful sight. Pollux had one eye already going black, he had a long scratch all down one cheek, presumably done with Castor's ring, and he had lost a front tooth; Castor's nose was bleeding, so was one leg where Pollux had bitten him, he had a bump on his forehead where Quintus had hit him with the jug; his belt had

broken, his tunic ripped from neck to hem, and with his bare chest all dabbled with blood and wine he looked like a victim marked for sacrifice. He broke loose from Tiberius who was holding him, and wrapping the remains of his dinner dress round him bolted out of the house. I apologised as shortly as I could and followed him. He was already some way down the street, crying now, and still declaiming loudly; a small crowd had already collected to watch him. Tipsy young men in blood-and-wine-stained clothes, weeping and cursing to themselves in Homeric Greek, are not common in the streets of Rome even in these degenerate days. Once his dinner dress fell off and he stopped, roared like a lion, and rewound it savagely. I hurried after him as fast as I could in my condition, calling to him in Greek. At the second corner he turned and ran back to me, suddenly tamed. He put his arm round me and we walked home like that, he weeping and I consoling.

The new year came in with bitter cold and rain and the roof leaked. After persistent chivvying we managed to get the landlord to repair it, and even replaster the ceiling which we were fully expecting to have to pay for ourselves. Gaius came round with all the Aventine Imperial Engineers and engineered with all the plaster and tools till they nearly drove the builders crazy. After that, which was in the middle of February, there seemed to be nothing to do except sit and wait for the baby to arrive while all the other women in the block came in and told me about their own confinements, their daughters' confinements, their sisters' confinements, and, worst of all, confinements of friends of friends of theirs where something had gone fatally wrong, until my mind spun with accounts of babies who had been born feet first, babies with twelve fingers, or two heads, Siamese twins or dog-headed babies. However, having got the idea firmly in my head, as I suppose most young mothers have, that my baby was going to be

the best and most beautiful in the world, I was not unduly disturbed by all this. It was the waiting that got me down, sitting there, counting the days and wondering whether it was going to be a boy or girl. Tiberius came in occasionally bringing the latest gossip about the family, how Marcus had swum the Tiber in full evening dress for a bet or how Quintus had had a thundering row with his future brother-in-law and was now refusing to come to the wedding. The day when the baby was expected came and went without sign of it and it was not until over a week later that the pains suddenly started late one night and Castor rushed off to fetch the midwife – a curious old woman who had been a prostitute until she grew too old for it and still rouged copiously and wore a rather moth-eaten blonde wig. Along she came with all her mysterious herbs and potions and locked herself in the bedroom with me and the maid. Castor went out and got a skin of wine from the nearest wine shop and, fortified with this, settled down to wait. It was about five hours later when the agony was over and the midwife was swaddling up the baby that I called him to come in. He came, stumbling and hiccuping and holding on to the doorpost for support, and stared at me anxiously.

‘It’s a boy,’ I said.

‘Great.’ He swayed to and fro for a minute and then fell heavily backwards full-length on to the floor, his mouth open and his arms outstretched above his head. I laughed, and then turned over and went to sleep.

About a couple of hours later I was woken by the entry of Marcus and Tiberius. The maid had kept away the women from the block who had come in to see how I was but she was not proof against Marcus’s charm and the two came stumbling into my bedroom, both rather drunk and in full evening dress.

‘So the poor little brute’s arrived at last,’ said Marcus. ‘You look pretty green. When did it arrive?’

'About two hours ago.'

'Oh. We were depending on you for a drink.'

'Well, there ain't none. Lucius drank it all.'

'He looks it.'

'Good party last night?'

'Fair. Usual sort of thing.'

'Marvellous,' said Tiberius. 'Simon was there - you know Simon - and he taught me some Hebrew.' He quoted in the original, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork."

'Yes, I had one, but the wheel came off,' said Marcus.

'Oh, you get lost. Yes, and he said he'll teach me Hebrew if I like, though he says Aramaic would be more use. God I do feel awful. I haven't been to bed at all tonight. Marcus has the jiffy.'

'Who with?'

'I don't know,' said Marcus. 'She never told me her name.'

At this point Castor appeared. 'Morning. Where's Titus? Oh here he is. Will he mind if I pick him up? he's awake already.' He lifted him out of the cradle, and held him at arms' length, looking rather frightened. 'He is going to be Titus, isn't he? I must say he is rather pretty. He's got eyes just like Tiberius. Shame on you, Fulvia. Tiberius, I've got a couple of swords somewhere, you wouldn't care to step into the next room and settle this, would you? Look, darling.' Titus had indeed got Tiberius's curious eyes, green with an aureole of gold round the pupil. 'Well, I consider that most suspicious, don't you, Marcus?'

'Don't look at him over the back of his head,' I said, 'you'll make him squint.'

'Well, it's a funny little thing,' said Marcus. 'Not quite as ugly as Cornelia's baby, but even so. Come on, Tib, let's go. I don't want to spend hours staring at a ruddy baby, even if it is your son.' He bolted with Tiberius after him.

'Do you want to go to sleep again, sweetie?' said Castor.

'Yes, I simply must. Give me a kiss before you go.' Castor kissed me and said: 'I shan't see you till this evening then. Bye-bye, take care of yourself.'

Quintus's sister's wedding took place about a week after this. Castor at first refused to go, especially seeing I could not, but in the end I persuaded him to go so that he could bring me back an account of the proceedings. I was very bored with lying in bed by this time; Cornelia had been to see me once or twice and had been horrified to find that I was feeding Titus myself; all the neighbours' wives came in and gossiped about babies, but their talk was almost more boring than solitude.

By the time Castor came home from the wedding I was in bed but not yet asleep. I sat up as he came tiptoeing into the room; he stopped and said, 'Sorry, did I wake you?'

'No, I was awake already. Tell, tell. What was it like?'

'Oh, it was an absolute circus. Every member of those two families seems to hate every other member, and there they all were being frightfully polite to each other. Oh yes, and Quintus had asked Ascyltos and his son Hermas and then he didn't turn up himself for ages, so those two stood in a corner drinking hard and talking to nobody. It seems they all consider Quintus's sisters-in-law frightfully low, along of their being Jews, and of course everybody else thought they were much too low to speak to. However, everything just went okay till Quintus turned up. With my brother. Slap in the middle of the sacrifice, and those two, if you please, sat on the edge of the nearest table cracking nuts and making derisive remarks. Quintus's father tried to reason with them at first, and then he tried to get one of the servants to chuck them out, and neither of those seemed to act. Finally Giton – the bridegroom, you know – fairly lost his temper and jolly well told Quintus and Pollux what he thought of them. In Greek. And such Greek! The sort of stuff they may speak in the slums

of Alexandria perhaps, but no such language as they ever spoke in Hellas. I could barely understand it. And those two listened without moving a muscle, and at the end Quintus said, quite quietly – in Latin – “I could bear to be insulted by the son of a slave perhaps, but that he should marry my sister, never.” And they walked out, having by this remark insulted not only Giton, but about half the guests, who were slave born, or their fathers were.’

‘Oh God, why did I have to miss this?’ I said. ‘It sounds marvellous. Goodness, it must have been funny.’

‘It was rather. All the same, I reckon within about the next few months there’s going to be the most terrific bust-up somewhere in that family. Everything’s pointing that way; I don’t feel at all happy about it.’

CHAPTER X

I must at this point go back and take up the thread of Tiberius's life. He had in fact been prospering; his reputation as a brilliant, if somewhat erratic, young barrister had been growing and he now usually had at least one case on his hands whenever I saw him. He bought two new togas and had himself shaved more frequently, and his father congratulated himself on the fact that the boy was settling down at last. His father also was prospering – 'My dear papa is coining money,' Tiberius used to say. 'Too vulgar for words, my dear, but then what can one do?' – and the money came rolling in though how I never quite made out, so that he remarked that at last he could live like a gentleman. There were new slaves and quantities of new jewellery for Tiberius's mother and he sunk money in real estate all over the place. In the midst of this excitement, about a month after Quinta *Cornelia*'s wedding, his wife quietly took to her bed and died, for no very obvious reason. The news reached us almost immediately via a slave of Cornelius's that our little slave-girl had met in the market; about half an hour later Tiberius appeared. I tried, in deep embarrassment, to express sympathy, but he brushed this aside. 'Don't try and comfort me. That is why I came here because of all the people at home coming to console with us and I can't stick it. I ask you, every blessed client of Fa's coming along, *already*, to "express their regrets" as they put it. Can't they see it only makes it worse?' – with a sudden gust of tears. 'And then being expected to stay there all night with that thing there, it's ghastly, you've no idea, like Mamma and yet not like Mamma, like a sort of ghastly caricature, the funeral yes, that I

can stand, a handful of grey ashes, long long ago at rest, no I don't mind that, but oh that *Thing* . . . ' A further outburst of tears followed. We made him up a bed on the floor and left him to storms of weeping and tormented dreams. In the morning he was calmer, but still determined not to go home till after the funeral. Castor pointed out that perhaps his father might want him around at such a time, but Tiberius simply said, 'Oh, I couldn't do any good. Besides Cornelia's there being the perfect Bereaved Daughter comforting Aged Papa. And Father's in such an awful state, it's horrible. I think it's perfectly obscene to see one's father really upset.'

The funeral passed, but Tiberius still stayed with us (not that either of us wanted to get rid of him, quite the contrary) and only left just before his family – including Cornelia and her husband and baby – went down to Portus Veneris. Castor had managed to get leave, so we went too.

That summer was much like the last one. The only change that had taken place was that the old man who owned the estate near us had died, and it had been bought by a Greek – a nice man who had emigrated from Corinth recently. We dined there occasionally, and Tiberius, Castor and I spent a lot of time there talking to him or reading in his excellent library. Otherwise there was nothing to do. We went fishing, or sailing or scrambled about on the rocks as before but the fun had gone out of it. Cornelia never went out at all and spent most of the time in his own room. 'So disconcerting,' said Tiberius, 'suddenly to have it borne in on one that one's father is a human being after all. I never really thought of him as having feelings like anybody else. Tell you another thing I've only just discovered – I think he really believes in the old religion. I didn't think anyone believed in that collection of fairy-tales any more, but it seems he really does. Most of it anyway. He's a complete anachronism of course. Mark

you, I always thought his code of manners and morals and what have you, was terribly stupid, but now I begin to see there's something in it in a rather stuffy sort of way.'

I began to laugh. 'Really, you know you're terribly conventional. You'd hate to live in two and a half rooms in a tenement in a jumble of dirty clothes, unwashed plates and remains of food and unmade beds and things the way we do. I don't mind, I'm a complete bohemian, and I think Lucius is too, but you'd loathe it. What is your religion and your moral code though, if not your father's?'

'Don't know really. There must be a God of some sort, not like Jupiter you understand, but a sort of all-moving spirit. And I suppose we're all part of him. Like that thing of Lucan's:

*Is there any home of God save earth and sea and air
And sky and steadfast hearts? Why seek we further
gods?*

Jupiter is whatever you see, whatever moves you.

I don't know about my morals, if I have any. I try not to hurt other people and I try and do what I can to help them in my profession. I keep my body clean of women, not for any moral reason, but simply as a matter of taste. *Voilà tout.* It doesn't seem enough, but I don't see what else I can do."

'What about your poetry?'

'Well, what about it?'

'If God's given you a gift you ought* to use it in His service.'

'You needn't talk like a Christian preacher. I suppose you want me to write psalms?'

'No, put it this way. You're a poet, and you know you are. You're not really a lawyer. Okay then, your business in this world is to write poetry and that's what you ought to be doing. Nothing else matters.'

'But, good God woman, do you think I don't want to?'

Only I can't. I haven't written anything worth reading for months. Do you think I see myself as the *Cicero de nos jours*? I know that if I do anything wort', doing it'll be poetry. But I seem to have lost it. Honestly, I think you're wrong in saying I'm a poet. Oh, don't let's argue about it; come on or we'll be late for dinner.'

About the middle of August Castor's leave ran out and he and I went back to Rome together, leaving the maid and Titus to follow when the rest of the family came back. (One of the slaves could wet-nurse him, and I didn't like taking him back to that heat.) And it was scorching there. The heat hit you like a high wind when you came out of doors: the pavements burnt through your sandal soles: from before noon till dusk Rome was a dead city. I lay naked on my bed and sweated through those long glaring white afternoons; the evening and nights were more bearable, though still abominably hot. The principal Christians seemed to be the only ones who had not fled the city. We went fairly often to Aquila's and Aristobulus's houses; it seemed cooler there somehow. One weary day followed another, I felt thoroughly ill, and both Castor and I were so bad-tempered that we hardly spoke to each other at all. The heat I think was telling on everybody's tempers; finally a fight broke out among a lot of Egyptians who lived in the same block; somebody was killed, several people badly hurt, the fight raged into our living room and out again, leaving a lot of smashed plates, someone's sandal, and the door swinging on one hinge. The police turned up in the end and quieted things down, and in the silence that followed, lying fretting and sleepless, I suddenly heard the rustle of rain outside. I got up and leant out of the window and watched the rain grow fiercer and fiercer, my hair soaking wet and the rain sluicing down my bare arms. After a bit it began to slacken, and I went back to bed, shivering now, pulled a couple of blankets over me and slept immediately. I awoke to grey skies and marvellous

coolness, and knew that the nightmare was over.

Tiberius's family came back about a week after this, and with them the maid and Titus. Tiberius soon after this proceeded practically to move in on us. 'It's like a tomb at home,' he explained, 'Father's busy over money and clients all morning, but the rest of the time he just sits about gazing into space. And never anybody to dinner, so we dine alone, and he never notices anything I say unless I say it at least three times. The only place where one feels in the least comfortable is the slaves' quarters and they don't like me about there.' After a bit we got used to this, books and papers and even a toga left by him; people turning up at all sorts of odd hours - 'Tiberius here?' - 'No, haven't seen him since this morning. Tried at home?' - 'Could be there, I suppose. Thought I'd try here first. Don't know where he is dining this evening, do you?' - 'Haven't a clue, but his only dinner dress is here, so he'll have to come back here to change.' - 'Right, I'll come back later then.' Castor kept on gloomily prophesying disaster to the Cornelian family, and was confirmed in this view when Tiberius turned up one morning reporting that Marcus had gone missing, 'It's probably only a love-affair but nobody's seen him for days.' It was in fact something far more sensational, as I found out at - of all improbable places - the Lord's Supper next week. A curious wrinkled little man, like a monkey said to me afterwards, 'You Metellus's wife, Fulvia?'

'Yes.'

'Ah! You know Cornelius, don't you?'

'Which Cornelius is that.'

'I d'know his other name. Light brown hair and looks like a lion.'

'Marcus. How do you know him?'

'I work as a groom at the Green stables. He's driving for 'em now y'know.'

'No, I didn't know. My God, I should think he'd be good.'

'You're telling me he's good. Got looks too, what's more. That's the way to draw the women. Be pin-up boy of all Rome soon. His face painted on the wine cups and everything.'

'Told you so,' said Castor afterwards. 'I don't blame him; it's the only thing he's any good at bar drinking, gambling and making love, but the family are going to raise hell.'

'Well, he knows when he's on to a good thing,' said Tiberius. 'I only wish I was earning half what he must be.'

Cornelia said, 'Thank Heaven his mother is spared this.' (His mother was the daughter of a not frightfully respectable innkeeper who had no manners and less morals, but there was a polite fiction that all members of the family were of unimpeachable respectability.)

Close on the heels of this surprise came Lucan, whom I had not seen for months, storming up the stairs of the tenement one morning to find me in a torn petticoat, washing my hair. Seeing me, he stopped, looking rather deflated.

'Isn't Tiberius here?'

'No, he's got a case; he won't be back till lunch.'

'Oh, damn it.'

'What's up?'

'Him, Lord of Earth and Sky, of Divine Majesty, bla, bla.' He sat down, rocking himself to and fro, lashin' himself into a rage.

'What's he done? Kicked you out and set the dogs on you?'

'More or less. Jealousy. Jealousy, pure and simple. It all started at the Quinquennial contest, when everybody applauded my poems more than his. And he knows my poems are better than his. I'm not being conceited, it's a fact. After all, it's not difficult to write better poems than him. Well, the end of it all was yesterday, when I was reading some of my poems to some people he just – got –

up – and walked out•slap in the middle. He said afterwards it was to attend a meeting of the Senate. Well, we all know how much *he* cares about the Senate. Obviously it was all just done to insult me.'

'Haven't emperors better things to do than deliberately insulting budding poets?'

'Maybe, but not this one. I tell you, it was – oh here's Tiberius. Tiberius I'm absolutely furious—' Followed the whole story told with even greater indignation.

When he had finished, Tiberius said: 'Well, now you're through with him maybe you'll settle down and write something decent.'

'And after he'd given me a quaestorship,' said Lucan, disregarding this remark, 'and made me a member of the College of Augurs and everything. Now he's forbidden me to give poetry readings even in private. I shall, of course, but it's a nuisance all the same. I can still write, you know, and my God, you see if I don't write a satire that'll make him wince.'

'Okay do, but mind you don't find your body being dropped into the Tiber one dark night.'

'Oh rubbish – I can't think why nobody's murdered him though.'

'Why didn't you?' I said. 'You had the entrée there.'

'I can't think why I didn't now. Of course you'd have to have the thing properly planned, and somebody to put in his place. All the same you see: one of these fine days somebody is going to murder him and may I live to see the day.'

CHAPTER XI

The Saturnalia came and went with even more lavish parties than last year at Cornelius's house (to which we were, rather to our surprise, invited) and very expensive presents for everybody. Pollux was there – Quintus refused to go anywhere without him – but, to my relief, he and Castor just nodded at each other, and otherwise ignored each other completely. We went to a party at Ascyltos's house too, where we saw, for the first time, Quintus's paintings in their finished state. In a rather bizarre way they were very effective but I could see Ascyltos was rather uneasy about them. All the same, Quintus was now painting the hall and feeling very pleased with himself.

Quintus was not the only one who was prospering that spring. Tiberius found a sudden flood of briefs coming in, some of them from quite influential people; his father walked the Forum with a mob of clients at his heels, being bowed at from every side; Marcus, too, was making a name for himself in his own world. We went to see him one day and found him sweating and trembling after a ^{story}, supervising the unharnessing of his horses, with a towel hung round his neck, and a little slave, at whom he swore constantly, following him round trying to undo his greaves. Another slave popped his head in, 'Scuse me, sir, that lady who was here yesterday—'

'Tell her to go to hell, I'm racing again tomorrow, and I want to have an early night.' Ribald laughter from all the grooms. He turned his attention to the horses again and insisted on inspecting them himself, in spite of an indignant chorus of grooms assuring him that he could trust them completely. It was a far cry from the casually lamed

horses and smashed" chariots of a year or so back. Now driving was his life, not his amusement, and it behoved him to take it seriously. Also he was earning good money by it, not to mention immense fame and popularity. In a word, the family was doing well for itself, and everything in the garden was lovely. Then, from a cloudless sky, fell the thunderbolt of Jove.

This time Tiberius did not come rushing round with the news. I heard of it at a dinner-party given by a fellow officer of Castor. He suddenly turned to me and said: 'Your patron – guardian – whatever he is – seems to have got himself into one hell of a mess.'

'Why, what on earth's happened?'

'Oh, haven't you heard? He's been accused of treason.'

'Good heavens, where on earth did you hear this?'

'I forget who told me. They were talking about it in the mess anyway. I think somebody had got it straight from the palace.'

'Fearful crop of treason trials we've been having lately,' remarked another guest.

'Well, I tell you what you may bet it is,' said our host. 'The Emperor wants his money. He'll be found guilty and executed – probably on evidence that's lies from beginning to end, but that's common form nowadays – and the Emperor'll seize all his property on some pretext or another. I don't know who's laid this accusation, but I'm sure it's some puppet of H.I.H.'s.'

'I should think you're right,' said Caster. 'One's heard of that kind of set-up time and again in gossip that filters through from the palace. What a nasty story, though.'

'I think it's simply appalling,' I said. At the back of my mind a voice that could not be silenced was demanding, 'What's going to happen to Tiberius? What's going to happen to Tiberius?'

'When's the trial going to be?'

'Next week some time.'

But Cornelius never came to trial. He knew only too well that the evidence would be rigged and that the Emperor would get all his property. He freed a number of his slaves, including Tryphaena, gave away some of his more beautiful statuettes, jewels and vases, rather than let Nero get them, and made a will leaving all his property to Tiberius – a last mad act of defiance, since if he had left half or three-quarters to the Emperor, Tib might have had the rest, but as it was, Caesar took all. Then he locked himself in his room, slashed his wrists and died, as he had lived, a free Roman gentleman.

I did not see Tiberius till his father's funeral, where he was performing all the duties of an elder son perfectly, pouring libations, saying prayers, etc, with none of the hysteria he had shown at his mother's funeral. The ceremony was held at Marcus's father's house, both because that was the family mansion and the urn would rest there and because the auctioneers were already turning Cornelius's house upside down. I did not get a chance to speak to Tiberius till after it was all over; he came up to me and said: 'Well, here beginneth the new life – in more senses than one.' Seeing that I was baffled by this remark, he went on: 'That' – waving his arm towards the urn – 'was my last act of the old religion. Tomorrow I'm being baptized.'

To me, flattering myself as I did that I was Tiberius's confidante on every subject, this was a double shock. 'When did you decide this?'

'Oh, about a week or two ago. Before all this cropped up. It seems like a century. But I've been thinking about it for ages. Surely you've seen me at the meetings?'

'Yes, but I didn't think you were serious about it, any more than you were about all those other religions you used to be so interested in.'

'Well, I am. Dead serious. Perhaps the only thing I am serious about.'

The news of this was round the family in a flash. Mostly it evoked horror or derision. The most damning comment came from Pollux, who said: 'Well, he seems to have more sense than I gave him credit for. He knows dam' well that the Christians don't let any of their religion starve.'

After the funeral Tiberius moved in on us and Gaius was sent to old Quintus, whose wife drove him nearly wild by mothering him. Such slaves as had not been freed by Cornelius were absorbed into the Emperor's household; the landlord of the house started looking out for a new tenant; the day of the auction was fixed.⁴ Cornelia's marriage settlement and all her private possessions were untouched but the boys' things were counted in with their father's and Tiberius came to us with nothing but the clothes he stood up in and his father's seal ring. He had a dinner dress and a few books - Homer, the Phaedo, Sappho, Horace, the Georgics - at our place, but otherwise nothing. Even the little money he had saved from the proceeds of his cases had been seized. However, Castor and I had a little ready cash which we insisted on Tiberius taking to buy back some of his more precious possessions. At first we suggested that we should go and buy for him but he said, 'No, auctions are always amusing, even if it's one's own house being sold up.'

The selling had not yet started when we arrived and a mob of people, Greek, Jewish, Syrian, Roman, complete with wives and children were wandering all over the house fingering everything, inspecting the bedding for bugs, kicking the tables to see if they were solid, opening and shutting the folding stools and chairs, measuring things with little bits of string, breathing out fumes of garlic wherever they went. Worse still were the children: one small boy had climbed up the pile of chairs that covered the dining-room table and was sitting there, defying both the other children who were trying to drive him off and his mother who was shrieking: 'You come off there, Dio,

'fore your father comes back, or you see what he give you'; another child had found a bit of red chalk that the auctioneers had been chalking numbers on to the lots with, and with it had given a copy of the Venus of Cnidos lipstick, rouge, and two large red spots on the nipples. Tiberius rubbed these ornaments off with a corner of his toga.

A little Jew sidled up to us.

'Mr Tiberius? Your sister sent me along to bid for a few things, so if you see me bidding, don't you bid against me.'

The big furniture, piled in the hall and dining room went first, then came what the auctioneer called the 'objy dar'. 'What you got there, Rufus? Pair o' dogs? Hold 'em up so we can have a look at 'em. Oh, pair o' horses. Now what am I bid for a pair o' nice little bronze horses? Two hundred? Hundred then? Well, say fifty, just to start it. Nobody give me fifty? Well, say something gentlemen, just to start it.'

'Twenty,' said somebody at the back of the room.

'Twenty I am bid. Twenty – thirty Thirty. Do I hear forty? Thank you, sir. Forty I am bid. For – fifty. Fifty. Sixty. Sixty. Do I hear seventy? Sixty I am bid. Sixty. Going, gone, gone. And the name is . . . ?' One after another statues, vases, statuettes were disposed of at express speed, mostly pretty cheap – the Emperor had had what good stuff there was – with a flood of disrespectful jok' from the auctioneer that left Tiberius torn between rage and laughter. We had the pleasure of seeing a dealer pay an exorbitant price for a modern copy of a black-figure vase; most of Tiberius's books were knocked down to Cornelia's dealer; we got a number of oddments, including the wine-bowl, skull and one-legged Hermes which had decorated Tiberius's room, for almost nothing. We sat the whole thing out, even the sale of kitchen utensils, where I bought a couple of saucepans. After we had paid off, and the Jew had given us such things as Cornelia had bought

for Tiberius, there was little enough to show. Most of Tiberius's favourite books, papers and oddments; some bedding; and a few changes of clothes. But he declared that he didn't want any more; that possessions were a fearful nuisance; that these were the only things he used anyway and, in short, that he was perfectly content. He seemed to have weathered the storm without much loss; numbed by the first shock, he did not wake to the full horror till later.

CHAPTER XII

We congratulated ourselves the disaster had touched us surprisingly little, but in fact it brought in its wake a train of minor disasters which left our lives shattered. I suppose it could hardly be otherwise; when someone like Cornelius fell, he was bound to bring a lot of other people down too.

One such was Aquila whom Tiberius brought back to dinner – this meant providing dinner for the greyhounds too. His toga was still beautifully washed and folded, but he ate voraciously and we afterwards discovered that he and the dogs had been living for the last three days on such food as he had been able to bring away from a dinner party at Ascyltos's.

Finally he pushed his plate away, satisfied. Tiberius did the same, filled up glasses all round and said: 'Well, where do we go from here?'

'What do you mean, where do we go from here?' I asked. 'Where does who go from where?'

'Aquila and me. We've got to get money from somewhere. I can't go on sponging on you for ever.'

'Look, don't bother about that, please.'

'There's still your barristering,' said Castor.

'Oh, is there? Yesterday I had eight clients. Today I have two. The other six informed me politely but firmly that they would prefer to put their cases in the hands of another counsel. And you can bet your bottom dollar that I'm not going to get any more briefs.'

'What about your uncles?'

'I don't like having to sponge on the family. Uncle Quintus can't really do anything for me, he's not a rich man, it's quite enough that he's taken on Gaius.'

'Why hasn't Cornelia taken on Gaius?'

'He wouldn't have it. I think he thought she'd keep him in order, which certainly no one does *chez* Quintus. Anyway, I sounded Uncle Marcus about the possibility of some sort of allowance, but he seemed to think nothing doing. I must say I'd rather be independent of the family, and earning money by my own efforts; I don't see how, but something's bound to turn up. After all, people don't just starve.'

'*Don't they?*' said Castor vehemently. 'My brother and I dam' nearly starved during that awful hard winter we had a few years ago - remember? Only one tunic and a thin cloak apiece, and shoes full of holes. My God, what didn't we do? We begged in the streets most of the time. Then I got a job as groom for the Whites, but they sacked me after three weeks. My brother taught Greek to some children for a bit, but that was wretchedly poorly paid - he barely had enough money for washing his togas and he couldn't go to lessons in just a tunic. I can't think why we didn't starve.'

'There's no work for people of our sort, Tiberius,' said Aquila. 'We aren't trained for anything and all the unskilled labour's done by slaves now. You can write, I grant you, but you won't make much money by that.'

Tiberius was silenced by these remarks. Evidently it was borne in on him for the first time that money did not just drop from heaven, and that it was possible to find oneself without any. After Aquila had gone, he said, 'I always wondered how on earth Aquila had got himself into this sort of position - I mean, a gentleman without money, sort of - I wondered whether he might be some rich man's by-blow or something. Now I begin to see. In fact I feel there's an awful danger that I may turn out like him.'

'Don't you want to?'

'Good God no. I want to *live*. That's not a life he's living.'

‘He’s happy with it though.’

‘Well, why?’

Why indeed? Aquila always remained an enigma; his origins completely unknown, no religion, no love-affairs, no particular interest in anything as far as we could make out, no one ever saw Aquila drunk, he never gambled, he just followed other people about, listened to their conversation, joined in it himself occasionally, and seemed completely happy like that.

In the meantime the whole Christian community had been shaken to its foundations by the arrival of Paul and Luke. We did not hear of this until after they had arrived; Paul was under house-arrest, but anyone could go and see him, so we went up to the house he had rented in the Pincian

We found him, a small, plump man with a fringe of reddish hair round the back of his head, in impassioned argument with a number of Jewish elders. He broke off as we came in to say in Greek: ‘Well, who are you?’

‘Brethren,’ said Tiberius.

‘Not Jews?’

‘No, Romans.’

‘Ah yes, I’m a citizen too.’

‘I didn’t mean that,’ explained Tiberius. ‘Genuine Romans born and bred in the city, of old families.’

‘He is,’ said Castor. ‘I’m Greek and my wife is from the North.’

‘So.’ He turned to the Jews and said, still in Greek, ‘These, you see Gentiles, uncircumcised, they will enter the Kingdom of Light while many of the children of Abraham will be cast into outer darkness.’

‘Yes, this corresponds to what we’ve heard already,’ said one of the Jews. ‘Will Monday afternoon be convenient then for you to speak to the Jews of this city, or have you no time to spare for those of your own race?’

‘I must needs preach to my own race first, but if they

will not hear me, I must go to the Gentiles and *they* will hear me. Monday will be perfectly convenient.' The Jews made their farewells ceremoniously and departed.

'The obstinacy of those people,' said Paul. 'The first thing they say when they come in here is why haven't they had any letters about me from the elders in Jerusalem. So it isn't enough to have a mandate to preach from the Son of God himself, so you must have one from the High Priest too. Do they think knowledge of God is confined to the House of Levi? Now what did you want?'

'We just came to pay our respects and enquire if you had had a pleasant journey from Malta,' said Castor.

'It was tolerable. That's the most you can say of any sea journey. We came on a ship that had wintered on the island, the *Castor and Pollux* of Alexandria.' (Castor winked at me.) 'At least we weren't wrecked again. I told the captain we should have wintered in *Laeia* harbour, but – did you ever try and convince a Greek that he was wrong? At all events none of us were drowned. No thanks to the Captain though, he was the most feckless man I've ever met. What are your names by the way?' We told him. 'You weren't among those who came out to meet me at Appii Forum, were you?'

'No,' said Tiberius, 'we've been rather in trouble lately, and we didn't hear the date of your arrival till afterwards.'

'I should have thought if you were in trouble, all the more reason for getting comfort from your fellow Christians. What sort of trouble?'

'Well, at the moment, largely financial. My father died recently and all his property was seized by the Emperor, and being of the class I am, I'm not trained to do anything useful.'

'You should be thankful to have the weight of a great property taken off your shoulders.'

'You can't live without money.'

'You can't live with too much either, Didn't Christ say that it was harder for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven than for a camel to go through a needle's eye? How can a man think of God with a great weight of money and property hanging round his neck? And slaves - men and women sold like beasts and treated worse than beasts.'

'My father's weren't. He was the best master in Rome. All his slaves were well fed, and clothed and treated kindly, with plenty of opportunity for earning their freedom if they worked hard.' His head was bent very low so I could not see his face; I was not certain whether he was crying or not.

'Your father was a heathen?'

'He was of the old religion if that's what you mean. It did well enough for him, but our generation can't believe in it any longer.'

'You talk as if you regretted belief in that bunch of demons.' Castor turned and raised one eyebrow at me. 'Do you realize that it's that belief that has landed your father in eternal torment.' Tiberius *was* crying now, silently and almost imperceptibly. 'It amazes me how it still persists. At Lystra, for instance, the populace took Barnabas for Zeus and me for Mercury, and it was all we could do to stop them sacrificing to us.' Castor turned to me again, eyebrows raised almost into his hair and took his head gently. Obviously nothing from this astounding man could surprise him any longer. I was only concerned to get away before he disgraced us by bursting out laughing, or Tiberius by getting his weeping enough under control to quarrel with Paul. Fortunately Luke arrived, wanting Paul about something, and we were able to get away, Tiberius still speechless with tears.

The situation still did not seem very bad. It was perfectly convenient for Tiberius to go on living with us; it cost

nothing for him to sleep in the living room, though he perpetually apologized for the fact that he couldn't pay any part of the rent, and he managed to be out for most meals. Normally he was not very welcome at dinner-parties, because, although he could and did talk brilliantly when he chose, he was liable suddenly to go into a daze, staring into space and humming tunelessly to himself, completely deaf to anything anybody said to him; because he almost always turned up late and had abominable table manners, and worst of all, because on a subject he cared about, he would contradict anybody and everybody regardless of the consequences to himself. Now, however, he somehow managed to cadge dinner invitations for nearly every night.

So everything was going fine when Castor was slung out of the army. 'Not a word of explanation,' he said bitterly. 'He just said he thought the Praetorian Guard would be better without me. Well, I dare say it would, I'm awfully slack, but no worse than most of them. The one comfort is my brother's got it in the neck too. I don't know what I'll do now, though.'

'Something'll turn up, as Tiberius says. I think we'd better get rid of the girl though. I can manage Titus perfectly well alone, and she's only another mouth to feed.'

'Oh, Fulvia, I am an awful husband, aren't I? I'm sorry. Why did you ever marry me?'

Getting rid of the girl was rather a problem, for I did not know of anyone who wanted a slave-girl, and didn't like the idea of just putting her up for sale in the market, knowing nothing about her purchaser, but she took the problem out of my hands by suddenly announcing that she would like to buy her freedom. Where she had got the money from I could not imagine, but this was revealed when a few days after getting her freedom she announced that she was going to marry the son of the baker next door

to us. We went and drank at her wedding, and left feeling that our problems would all be solved somehow, soon. The money we got from this lasted some while and we were certainly in a better position than Aquila who turned up one day with two changes of clothes and his dogs, saying that he was broke and his landlord had slung him out. This meant, of course, that he moved in on us, but he refused to take any of our food, so he was no extra expense. All the same, the money was running out and finally there came the day when Castor walked into the living room where Tiberius and I were sitting arguing about the *Phaedo*, and said: 'Well, this is it, kids. Seems we've had it.'

'Had what?' said Tiberius.

'Look here, I've flogged everything that I can find, paid the landlord what we owe him, and for the rest of this week and I've not got a penny over. Four days from now we've got to produce next week's rent or out we go. Unless there's something else we can flog. Fulvia, I thought you had some silver-topped rouge pots, or something.'

'Oh, I hocked those ages ago to buy food. Likewise most of my clothes and jewellery. Bar my evening dress and a few books, I've got nothing but the clothes I stand up in.'

'Well, we're little better off. Tib and I have got to have togas and evening clothes, otherwise we've no chance of sponging on anyone. Which is what we'll be doing, all of us, in a few days' time, for we certainly can't raise the rent.'

'Can't we borrow?' said Tiberius.

'Hate borrowing when there's no prospect of being able to repay. No, who can we quarter ourselves on?'

'Uncle Marcus – too stingy. Uncle Quintus – he's already taken in Gaius, we can't ask any more. The boys, of course, are out of the question. There's Cornelia – she'd take us in, but you'd be conscious of her silent disapproval all the time. Lucan – well, he's living with his uncle at the

moment and we can't go and quarter ourselves on Seneca. The Christians are mostly awfully hard up.'

'Persius,' I said.

'Could do. We might go along and sound him, and see if we could get a meal off him.'

'If we're going to get a meal off him I suggest it's this evening because there's nothing to eat in the house, except something for Titus.'

'Oh Lord,' said Castor. 'You might have told us sooner.'

'Well, I thought you'd have some money.'

'Persius it is then,' said Tiberius. 'You cope with Titus, and then dump him with that old hag across the way, and then we'll go.'

When we got there, we discovered that Persius and his wife were dining out; however the butler recognized Tiberius and very graciously provided us with half a cold chicken, some kid and a loaf of bread. We went away with these feeling utterly crushed by his condescension.

The next morning brought two pieces of good fortune - a note from Persius asking us to dine with him that evening, which, of course, we accepted; and Quintus, saying Ascyltos was giving a big dinner party tomorrow and would we like to come? We said you bet we would, and Tiberius and Castor, who had not been able to afford a shave for nearly a week, rushed off to Uncle Marcus's to get a shave off his barber. Persius, on hearing of the straits we were in, insisted on lending us enough money for the next week's rent and a bit over. Castor and I were thoroughly embarrassed by this, but Tiberius took it without a qualm.

'Don't you see,' said Castor later when we were talking this over in bed, 'for him poverty's just a game? He still can't believe in a world where food and clothing and a roof over his head aren't provided automatically by some mysterious agency. For the moment he thinks it's rather fun to live in this kind of squalor, then he'll hate it, finally

he'll settle down to it. After all, we have, and I at any rate, was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. So I dare say were you. You haven't the look of someone who's been born and bred in the gutter. The only thing that's left of it now is that we're all wildly extravagant. Tiberius more so than the rest of us. Of course he has no notion of the value of money and never will have. But look at us now. Think of the sort of upbringing Titus will have.' He paused and then said : 'Do you realize, Fulvia, that child is lawful heir to the throne of Sparta?'

Ascytus's dinner party was as vulgar and ostentatious as ever and full of boring people, but somehow in spite of this, Tiberius was in brilliant form. He imitated a certain eminent ~~actor~~ ('no names, no pack-drill,' he said but everybody recognized who it was), who had been a friend of his father's; he 'did' Cicero delivering his second speech against Catiline, with unprintable interpolations of his own; best of all, he imitated himself speaking in a celebrated divorce case he had done recently. I was terrified that he would put a foot wrong, and start being funny about freedmen, or Syrians or something equally offensive, but no. He guyed everything else though, from the gods downwards, including a turn about the great Twin Brethren quarrelling over which of them was really responsible for the victory at Lake Regillus which cut a bit near 'the bone; he parodied, he made up lampoons on the spur of the moment. Ascytus had various tame satirists and poets on the strength but he had never seen anything like Tiberius; even though most of it was above his head, he rocked with laughter. When we left, he said, 'Look, young man, I don't want to lose sight of somebody like you. Come round and see me tomorrow, when I'm sober. Right?'

Accordingly next morning Tiberius dressed himself in Aquila's toga, which was the cleanest we had, sleeked down his hair and presented himself at Ascytus's. He re-

turned just before lunch, in a state of high excitement, and flopped on to the floor.

'Oh Lordy. My poor feet. I've been following that old b— all round the Forum, with everybody bowing and scraping to him. Makes me sick. Still it's been worth it. I've got a present for you, beautiful. Here, catch.' He chucked over a little bundle which, when opened, proved to contain a pair of silver and turquoise ear-rings.

'Oh, Tiberius, you shouldn't.'

'They didn't cost much. We've still got enough over to pay Persius, and more. And — here comes the great news, kiddies — your Uncle Tiberius has been pulling strings for you. You're all on the pay-roll. Alone I did it. Well, not quite alone. Quintus put in a word for us.'

'Then I won't take a penny,' said Castor furiously. 'I'm not going to be beholden to that little shit.'

He was immediately overwhelmed by a chorus of: 'Oh, don't be so silly,' but he put on his most obstinate expression, and I saw it was going to be a hard job to shift him. It took an afternoon's hard talking from the three of us, but we did it in the end. I was rather doubtful when that night he began to talk melodramatically about never having been so humiliated in all his life, but next morning he put on his toga and came along with the rest of us to pay his homage to the great man and receive his purse.

'This is all very well,' he said later on, 'but it's June already; soon he'll be going away for the summer and what'll we do then?'

'Follow him, of course,' said Tiberius. 'He goes to Baiae and it's as easy to live there as Rome.'

'But we'll lose this flat,' I said.

'You didn't when you came to stay with us last summer.'

'That was because we paid the landlord all the rent for the time we'd be away in advance. We can't afford to do that now.'

'Well, lose the flat then. We can find another one when we get back to Rome. But we've got to follow Ascytos. We can't afford not to.'

And follow him we did.

CHAPTER XIII

The journey down to Baiae began well. Ascyltos had quite a train going down, with mules to carry his baggage, and onto one of these, by Quintus's kind intervention, we loaded all our stuff, including Titus. Castor was so infuriated by further help from Quintus that he very nearly set out to carry our baggage all the way to Baiae himself. I began to wonder how long it would be before he turned his back on Ascyltos and we were turned on to the streets to starve in order to satisfy his principles.

We started late the first day, and spent the first night at Persius's villa which was about eight miles down the Appian Way; where Ascyltos and the rest of them, including Quintus and Pollux stayed, I don't know.

The next day the heat came and with it the dust. It penetrated everywhere: dust in our shoes, in our clothes, in our hair; dust under our fingernails, dust inside my stays; dust in our eyes and our nostrils and parching our throats. Even Ascyltos in his curtained litter complained of it; for us, walking at the tail of a crowd of people who kicked up the dust, it was intolerable. Titus wailed, and rubbed his knuckles in his eyes, and finally Castor, Tiberius and I had to carry him all the way in turn. Heat-ripples danced above the endless white road that unrolled before us; we panted and sweated and swore all through that weary day, and late in the afternoon came to our resting-place for the night.

The inn was a large once-white house with lumps of plaster peeling off the front of it. It stood a little way back from the road, surrounded by fruit trees, the door led straight into the main room, a large smoky barn of a place

very dark to our sun-dazzled eyes. The evening's festivities had evidently already started, for someone was playing a small tweedy tune on some kind of stringed instrument accompanied by an appallingly unrhythmic pair of castanets. The tune sounded as aimless as the cicadas outside. A large overripe dancing girl was writhing about on a small stage; the occupants of the room – about half a dozen there were – hardly glanced at her. Smoke billowed in from the kitchen, and everything, even the strings of onions and garlic and bunches of herbs hanging from the rafters, seemed covered with dust. Directly opposite us was the door into the courtyard behind through which came a solid triangle of light. This seemed preferable to the barn, so we pushed through.

This si 'o of the house it was cool, roofed over with a trellis of vines. There were about a dozen wooden tables and benches spattered with pigeon-droppings, silky and pale grey from long exposure, and warped by sun and rain. There was also a large stone bath, filled with water from a lion's head, with vegetables bobbing about in it, and jars of wine cooling; the outfall ran down a gutter to join a stream we could hear at the end of the yard, behind a thorn fence. That was all. It was empty unless you count the pigeons on the vine trellis, the hens scratching in the dust, a dog lying in the shade of the bath, and the proprietor's two children. We sat down and ordered some wine to pass the time till supper was ready.

Castor kicked off his shoes and stretched himself all over with great deliberation like a panther, extending each limb in turn. 'Think of those poor devils sweating away in their togas at the Praetorian barracks.'

'Think also of the money they earn,' said Pollux.

'I don't care, we're well out of that.' He gave a final stretch and then suddenly flopped. 'Not that we're any better off now, but it makes a change. Tiberius, don't stare

at the sky with your mouth open, or a pigeon will drop something in it.'

'Or I'll be blinded like Tobias's father, I was thinking.'

'Think away,' said Quintus, 'it's a free country – so they say.' After looking in vain for a bit of table suitable for drawing on he was drawing on his tablets. 'Do you find a diet of pigeon-shit conducive to thought? I wish that little girl would stand still for a minute.'

'Give her a copper,' suggested Pollux, 'and she'll stand still for hours.'

'Looking like a wooden doll. No, thank you.'

'Why do you want to draw her anyway?' said Tiberius.

'Because she's beautiful.'

'Beautiful? She's probably covered with lice. I shudder to think what our beds will be like tonight.'

'I don't care if she's covered with rats, she's still beautiful. Both those children are pretty good, but she's really lovely.'

We turned and stared at the children. There was a small boy of about three, clad in a short vest that barely covered his stomach, and with a string of charms against the evil eye round his neck, who was sitting in the dust, intent with the seriousness of childhood on some complicated game with sticks and pebbles. He was in no way different from the hundreds of pretty, dirty, appealing children with which the streets of the Saburra abound. The girl was, though. After a series of leaps from a table-top she had secured a bunch of unripe grapes and was now still at last, sitting with her back against the stone bath eating them, staring intently at us. She was about ten, dressed in a dirty tunic, too short and too tight, with long thin arms and legs, tangled brown hair and a face that Psyche might have envied. She watched us with the utter indifference of a goddess. Quintus could be heard whispering, 'Oh, Fortune, keep her still till I've finished, keep her still, keep her still,' but his prayers were not answered. She suddenly

crammed the last of the grapes into her mouth, let out a wild yell and started to chase a hen round the yard, leaping over benches and on to tables and scattering her brother's cherished playthings right and left. He opened his mouth and started to bellow, stolidly and persistently. A woman emerged from the house and bore them off, slapping and scolding, leaving Quintus gazing sorrowfully after them, and the rest of us helpless with laughter.

Pollux, as soon as he could speak again, leant across the table to Castor and muttered, barely moving his lips, 'That was Eros's child, I'll swear. Absolute spit of him, bar the colour of her hair, and wild as a hawk. She looks a bit divine too.'

'She probably is. So what?'

'Well, "ightn't we to do something about it?'

'Such as?'

'Well, I don't know. She's one of us though.'

'Leave her to be brought up a mortal. She'll be far happier that way than have her head stuffed with ideas about her father's divinity, however true.' He leant back and started to talk to me and Pollux who could say no more.

The sun had disappeared by now into the clouds that hung over the horizon. Inside the house someone else had taken over the castanets and the tune was proceeding at a terrific pace. Spoons, knives and plates started to appear, but no sign of food. Tiberius, thoroughly bored, started building elaborate erections out of these and the glasses. I watched his hands: incredibly clumsy – even his writing was almost illegible, unlike Castor's which was regular and lovely – but long-fingered and perfectly formed, his one great beauty. After his pyramid had fallen over three times and a glass had been smashed he produced his tablets and started writing, happy for the first time in months, muttering to himself, swaying from side to side and occasionally, when he got stuck, waving his hands above his head as

if he hoped to snatch inspiration from the air. Finally he held it at arm's length, glared at it, decided it would have to do and handed it over to me for criticism.

I deciphered, from the wild scratches on the tablets :

*Syrian dancing-girl, hair caught up in a net,
Mechanically swinging her shaking hips to the beat,
Drunken, abandoned, she dances in a smoky pub,
Harshly clacking the reeds;
Swaying limbs, calling, crying to the traveller:
Why stay out in the summer dust
Rather than lie here drinking on your couch?
Here are mugs and tumblers and punch-ladles,
Roses, flutes and guitars,
Even a reed pipe, shepherd-fashion,
Under Arcadian rocks.
Thin wine, poured out from a pitchy cask,
A noisy rattling stream,
Crown of flowers, violet and saffron,
Mixed with roses, purple and pink;
Lilies picked by the virgin river,
Brought by the river god in wicker baskets.
Round white cheeses that dry in bags of rushes;
Waxy autumn plums; chestnuts and sweet red
apples—
Here's all the harvest of field and vineyard and heart.
Here are bloodstained blackberries. tough-stemmed
bunches of grapes,
Hanging from a rush-rope sea-green cucumbers,
And guarding the summer-house armed with a
willow sickle,
A little god, mock-ferocious, with an outsize phallus.
Come, pilgrim, spare your little donkey
Tired and sweating, since Vesta loved an ass.
Now the reiterated cry of cicadas pierces the trees,
Now even the lizard is hiding in the cool of the hedge;*

*If you've any sense you'll lie and drench yourself in
a wine-glass,
Unless you prefer those modern crystal cups.
Heia, how sweet to rest your weary limbs,
Here under the shade of the vines,
Binding on your heavy head a rose-garland,
With a pretty girl in your arms;
Tasting her sweetness, kiss by kiss -
To hell with all the Stoic moralists.
What good will sweet garlands do to thankless
ashes,
Or do you want to crown your urn with roses?
Set down the wine and the dice and death to who
thinks of tomorrow,
Death's twitching your ear: 'Live,' he says, 'I'm
coming.'*

'You know, it's bloody good,' said I, as I handed it back. Tiberius, who had been staring into the distance with the self-conscious indifference of a poet having his poems read, suddenly leapt back to life and said: 'My God, you really think that? I think I respect your judgment more than anyone else I know.'

'Honestly, I think it's the best you've done yet,' I said.

'Well now, ain't that wonderful.' The poem was passed round the others and received with more or less favourable comments while Tiberius drummed on the table with a couple of spoons chanting to himself: 'Oh bliss, bliss, this is my first poem for I don't know how long, and now I'm shut of all those bloody law-books and all those greasy vulgar clients and everything, I'm *free* now.' The proprietor, thinking we were getting impatient for our dinner, came up and asked what we wanted.

'Bring me a laurel wreath,' said Tiberius, 'and a lyre, if you've got such a thing. Don't worry, I'm not mad, only happy, happy, happy' - crescendo, with vigorous percus-

sion accompaniment – ‘with a happiness the gods themselves might envy.’

We arrived in Baiae late one afternoon and had the good fortune to run into Mars almost immediately, leaning against a wall, slightly drunk (this was, I afterwards discovered, his normal condition; in fact, nobody ever saw him sober). He said that they – the gods – hadn’t got room to put us up, but he knew a man just round the corner who he thought had some rooms free. The man had three rooms in fact; they were dirty, rather smelly, bare of furniture except for the beds, and, as we later found out, bug-ridden, but they were cheap, and we took them. One room Castor, Titus and I had, another Quintus and Pollux, and Aquila and Tiberius shared the third, which was between the other two. It was getting late and we were tired after the journey, so we postponed going to see Venus and Hercules till tomorrow, and just got bread and fried fish from a stall nearby and went to bed before it was even dark.

It was about two hours later that I was woken by the shuffle of bare feet over the rough boards and looked up to see Pollux standing in a patch of moonlight by the door. Castor sat up and said: ‘Well, what do you want?’

‘I’m sorry, Castor – Castor, you don’t mind our living in the same place, do you?’

‘Why should I? We’ll probably be out all day, so I won’t see much of you.’

‘But Castor, you don’t understand: I’m lonely.’

‘Do you think I’m not?’

‘You’ve got Fulvia.’

‘And you’ve got Quintus.’

‘But that’s different. Fulvia’s one of us, and Quintus isn’t.’

‘I’m not a goddess.’

‘No, I know you’re not, but you don’t belong to this time

or place either. You're turned loose on a strange world and have to make the best of it, like us.'

'*You're* not making the best of it, by any manner of means,' said Castor sharply. 'Have you told Quintus who you are, by the way?'

'No. He'd think I was bats.'

'Well, there are always the other gods!'

'But that's not the same,' – his voice rising to a wail. 'You're my brother even if you are no longer divine. Castor you must see.'

Castor lay down again, staring at the ceiling and said nothing. 'Castor. *Castor*.' There was no answer. He waited a few seconds more, and then turned and scuttled away. After he had gone Castor sat up, pushed the bedclothes back and put one foot out of bed, as if minded to follow him; then he changed his mind and curled up again with his back to me, pulling the blanket tightly round him. I put one arm round his shoulders, but he shoved me away and began to sob, slow, controlled sobs that showed no sign of ever ceasing.

CHAPTER XIV

The next morning we had to go and make our salaams to Ascyltos; in the afternoon it was hot and we slept, so it was not until dinner-time that we went along to see the gods. Their pub was cleaner, more sophisticated and infinitely nastier than the one on the Appian Way, and when we arrived still fairly empty. We had been asked to dine with Venus and Hercules so we pushed through to the kitchen where we found Hercules, a fat, ill-shaven man who sweated profusely under the arms, surrounded by herbs and spices, presiding over the cooking of the meal like a priest. What went into it I don't know, but it certainly was one of the best meals I have ever tasted. Venus appeared and had something to eat standing up before going off to start dancing; Mars wandered tipsily in, sat down on the edge of the kitchen table, there being no more chairs, and ate his way methodically through the whole meal. Conversation was in Greek so I found it rather difficult to follow, moreover it was sticky since god-gossip was impossible in the presence of Tiberius, Quintus and Aquila.

By the time we had finished our meal and left the kitchen the main room of the inn had filled up a good deal. The drinkers almost without exception divided themselves neatly into two categories : the local wide boys, in grubby tunics and bright-coloured cloaks, their hands loaded with cheap rings, and the hangers-on of the summer visitors, mean, rat-faced and rather nervous-looking. I realized with an incredulous shock that we belonged to the latter category. They sat in small groups round the edge of the room, some with anxious, pinched 'where-is-the-next-meal-coming-from' expressions, some with the bitter gaiety of

'let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die', while the corner boys occupied most of the middle of the room, grouped round a curious old man with long grey hair and beard, his clothes apparently entirely held together by safety-pins and bits of string, who leant against the wall, chewing. The corner boys chattered boastfully to each other, but they looked out of the corners of their eyes at the old man, and it was obviously him they were trying to impress. Occasionally he muttered something in bad Greek to no one in particular and all the boys listened with a mixture of awe and contempt. Conversation in a dozen languages flowed round us - Greek, Latin and Aramaic predominating in about equal proportions. Tiberius I could see was loving it; myself, I was not too certain. Like a devil, I had a horror of being cast out into the void, and this was a bit too like the void of my imagination, the outer darkness from which I had emerged, to be comfortable.

Opposite us a number of Jews were gabbling in Aramaic, their conversation dominated by a regal-looking man with a carefully clipped beard. I had a few words of Aramaic, enough to gather that they were talking about food, but not to follow what they were saying. Scraps of conversation floated from the rest of the room.

'So that's just enough to buy fried fish for all of us tomorrow lunch-time,' said an upper-class Greek voice; 'then in the evening there's the dinner-party, and we'll be able to bring away enough from that to last us the next day. And the day after that we may get some more money.'

'What about Periklas? You've forgotten Periklas,' said another voice gloomily, and the first voice was silenced.

'Er father wasn't 'alf in a state. Took to following me about with a knife 'e did. Then one day he came up to me and said she was 'avin' a baby and what was I goin' to do about it. So I said to him " 'Ow d'yer know it isn't Rufus's?" "Rufus who?" 'e said. "What not know Rufus?" I said.

That sent him 'urtling off 'ome to question his dau'er all right.'

'What Rufus was it then?'

'Ow do I know? I just said the first name that came into my 'ead.' Loud laughter. The ragged man remarked 'crackling of thorns under a pot' but the corner boys evidently failed to catch the allusion . . .

'And so I said to the butler, "My good man, if you think I'm going to all the trouble of putting on a clean toga and dragging all the way up here to pay my respects to your master in return for half a chicken that obviously died of old age, you can think again . . ."

The Jews opposite had now got on to the subject of the good old days in Jerusalem. As the regal-lookin'g man was apparently the only person who had actually been to Jerusalem, he was holding forth, uninterrupted except by a timid little man who repeated monotonously at fixed intervals of time: 'Well, what about the Pharos at Alexandria?' Finally the other, unable to bear this any longer, turned on him and spat out one word which utterly crushed him, and reduced Tiberius and me, who understood it, to helpless laughter.

'What's that?' said Castor.

'Uncircumcised,' said Tiberius and collapsed into giggles again.

'Oh Lord! the most deadly insult ever. I must say, I simply can't understand the importance of that. Are you circumcised, Tiberius?'

'What me? Why on earth should I be? Are you?'

'No, but there was some talk of it before my baptism. Finally they decided that Paul had said it wasn't necessary for Gentile converts, so I needn't be.'

'Paul, indeed. I ask you, is he the son of God or is Jesus? What does he want to go round complicating Jesus's teaching with a lot of silly rules for?'

'In this case it's an abolition of rules. And if it hadn't

been for him we'd probably still have the whole of Deuteronomy hanging round our necks.'

'You've got to have some sort of order in religion,' I added. 'And it's got to be a corporate thing, not just personal, so that people can derive spiritual help from the others of their religion. Besides Christianity is the least complicated of all religions, you can't deny that. No elaborate initiations and grades and what-not, everybody goes through baptism and has the Lord's Supper.'

'If everybody partakes of the same mystery,' said Quintus, 'then the spiritual value of it must be almost nil, since it's all reduced to the level of the lowest people present, whereas the point of initiations and grades is that each person takes part in mysteries which are best suited to his level of spiritual perception.'

'The outward forms of the Lord's Supper are the same,' said Tiberius, 'but each person interprets it according to the level of his understanding. Naturally, some people get more spiritual benefit out of it than others.'

'Anyway,' said Pollux, 'this business of eating the body of this Jesus person and drinking his blood is obviously cribbed from one or other of the mystery religions, so I don't see how you can say that Christianity's any different.'

'Just because the outward forms are the same, does it argue that the whole thing is?' said Tiberius furiously. 'You might just as well say that a dialogue of Plato is the same as – as – well, as the latest scurrilous satire on the Emperor just because they're both written in ink on paper.'

'The difference between the mystery religions and Christianity,' said Castor, 'is like the difference between going to bed with a prostitute and going to bed with your wife. The one is a purely selfish affair just wanting to get a kick out of something, not even thinking about the woman, only about yourself, the other's the least selfish thing I know, a genuine expression of love, which is something really holy, even the love of a man for a woman which is about

the lowest form of love there is. Ninety per cent of the initiates of mystery religions are pure sensation-seekers, just looking for a new emotion, like a glutton looking for a new dish or a libertine looking for a new way to satisfy his lust.'

'Liar!' said Quintus. 'You needn't go laying down the law on mystery religions, anyway what do you know about them? Nothing, absolutely nothing.' His voice had risen almost to a scream.

'Calm down, do,' said Castor, 'everybody's looking at us. As a matter of fact, I know quite a lot about mystery religions. For one thing I was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries. That was some time ago,' Pollux gave a sharp laugh - 'but I still know enough about the mystery religions from friends of mine to see that they're religions for people who're incapable of religious feeling, that try and produce a third-rate substitute for religion by magnifying the outward trappings of it tenfold, just as the lecher who's lost the power to love tries every kind of perversion without getting as much pleasure out of it as a lover can out of one kiss.'

'Stuck-up fool,' yelled Quintus, 'you needn't think your religion's the only one, there're plenty of others much better.'

'Since when have you become religious?' said Tiberius. 'And is one permitted to inquire what religion you honour with your patronage?'

'I'm not initiated yet, but I thought Cybele.'

'Dear Christ, not that gang of barbarians.'

'Barbarian yourself,' said Pollux, 'you little philhellene prig can't you recognize the truth and purity of the religion of Cybele when you see it?' - shrieks of laughter from Tiberius at this. One of those pauses that suddenly occur during general conversation happened at this moment during which the ragged man could be heard to mutter quite distinctly, 'Lot of men running round with their

—'s cut off and a lot of silly women running after 'em. I wonder the Lord allows it.' Shocked silence from the rest of the room which was broken by shrieks of 'Bravo' and loud clapping from Castor. Aquila, Tiberius and I collapsed into giggles and everybody else turned round and stared disapprovingly at us. The ragged man scowled at us suspiciously and contemptuously, but said nothing.

It was growing late and people began to drift away. When there were only about half a dozen people left, and only the twins and I remained of our party, Venus decided that it was not worth going on dancing, came over to us and said, 'Okay, come through here, I want to talk to you.' The twins got up and went and I followed (somebody at the other end of the room yelled, 'No dearie, not you,' and there was a burst of laughter).

'Now we can talk,' said Venus. 'Is this your wife? Which one of you does she belong to?'

'Me.'

'And which are you?'

'Castor.'

'Oh, well who is she? She wouldn't be Psyche, would she?'

'No, she wouldn't. She was a virgin when I married her.'

'I don't know who I am. I can only remember about two years back. My name's Fulvia, and I'm nineteen, but who I am and where I came from, I couldn't say.'

Venus took my face between her hands and looked at me intently. 'Not, I should say, Rome, and certainly not the ninth century A.U.C.'

'I thought the future,' said Castor, 'which would explain why she can't remember anything. After all, you couldn't have people going round remembering the future. But how she got here remains a mystery.'

'There's more coming and going between centuries than you might think,' said Venus, 'but it doesn't do to enquire too closely into the causes.' She pulled off her blonde wig,

revealing close-cropped coarse black hair underneath, and started to clean off her make-up. I stared, amazed at the face that was revealed. With her make-up on she looked like forty, very cleverly made-up as eighteen; without she looked – well, both eighteen and forty, or for that matter, a thousand, the freshness of youth without its immaturity, the wisdom of age without its weariness. Her skin was very white, and her wide-open pale jade eyes gave her the perpetually wondering expression of the just grown up. She went on: 'What's the news from your part of the world?' – about the gods was evidently understood.

'Nothing,' said Pollux, 'except we saw a couple of kids in a pub on the Via Appia, about two stages out of Rome, that looked as if they might be Eros's.'

'If we're going to start tracking down all Eros's bye-blows, it'll be a life's work even for us,' said Mars, who had been stretched out, apparently asleep, on a bench against the wall.

'Tell you something else,' said Pollux venomously, 'Castor's turned Christian.'

'Yes, he told me that in his letter. Why, Cas?'

'What's the good of divinity without power? We're up against something bigger than ourselves where Christ is concerned, and we may as well recognize it.'

'Well, I don't follow that, but I don't agree. There's almost no news from our end. We get all sort of types in here, sailors from Puteoli and so on, but we've heard no news of any of us, bar a rumour that Zeus and Hermes had been seen at Lystra.' Castor winked at me but said nothing. 'An imposing-looking man with a long beard, and a little man with the gift of the gab. But they just stayed for a few days and where they went afterwards no one knows. The chap we got this from hadn't seen 'em himself, he'd only heard this rumour.'

'Sickening,' agreed Pollux.

'Does it matter?' said Castor; 'we've scattered now and

I don't suppose we'll ever find out what happened to half of us.'

I said nothing. I was overawed by all the assembled divinity, and suddenly rather wished I had married a human, but Castor winked at me flippantly and I saw that he was as much bored with this gossip as I was – or at any rate was pretending to everybody, even himself, that he was.

Outside in the street, Pollux heaved a deep sigh, and said: 'My God, what's come over them? They're more bestial than ~~human~~, let alone divine. Hercules especially, a greasy old man, wrapped up in his stomach.' Castor and I collapsed into giggles at this, Castor especially becoming so afflicted that he was obliged to stand on one leg in the middle of the road, doubled up like a person with a stomach-ache. Pollux looked at him with a pained expression. 'It's no laughing matter.' From windows above voices were yelling to get along with us, lot of drunks, and let honest people get a bit of sleep.

'Well, after what you've seen,' said Castor, 'are you going to become a worshipper of Cybele?'

'Of course not. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm holding to my divinity. What is the connection anyway?'

'That's just it.' Castor, as always when excited, was doing a kind of war-dance, hopping from one foot to another, and waving his hands. He was at a disadvantage compared to Pollux in that he was rather more drunk and hiccuping loudly. 'So long as you go on saying: "I'm holding to my divinity" you're bound to go downhill, the only reason we haven't is picking up with old Metellus, but a few more years of this life and we'll be no better than Mars. Whereas if you live like any other ~~human~~ with a normal life span you may do some good. It should be easier for us because we were brought up ~~human~~.'

'So the fox in Aesop that had had its tail cut off tried

to persuade the others that they'd be better off without. Very clever my dear brother, but I'm not having any. Moreover, I may have shared my immortality with you once but I'm damned if I'll do it again.' He turned and walked quickly away, leaving Castor standing in the road bawling at the top of his voice, 'You fool, you fool, you can't hang on to what you haven't got any more. What's divinity without power, or immortality without happiness? Remember the Sibyl they hung up in a cage for a spectacle — "Sibyl, Sibyl, what do you want?" — "I want to die." You'll be like that in a century's time, Pollux, *listen* —'

Pollux turned down a side street and disappeared.

Baiae revived a sudden rush of childishness' and lightness of heart in all of us. Tiberius especially was like a man who has had a heavy burden taken off his shoulders after many years and is at last able to stand upright. He spent most of the day wandering round Baiae in his oldest and dirtiest clothes, surveying a world where everything was as sharply exaggerated as the actors' masks in a play, where every foreigner or traveller brought news from Ultima Thule, where the face of God stared from every tenement wall, and the answer to the eternal riddle was shouted from every drunkard's mouth, if one but looked or listened right. 'Everything looks like it did when I was a small child,' he said to me one day, 'no shadows and almost no perspective, just a number of patches of colour set side by side. Curious in a way, one's seeing the world so differently.' A pause. Then 'You know those tile pavements that look solid, so that you seem to be looking down at a lot of little cubes, set one above another like steps, and then suddenly it changes, and you seem to be looking upwards at them? Well, supposing you could turn the world inside out like that, what do you suppose it would look like?'

'Horrible, I dare say.' We were down on the beach in

the hottest part of the day, under the tiny shadow of a tufa rock, and I felt far too sleepy for such speculations.

'I dare say it would. It's rather a frightening thought.' A long pause then, 'I think I'm turning rather Epicurean. I dare say it's natural at my age. It's probably only a phase. After all, there's nothing in it that conflicts with Christianity, it only means using your powers to the fullest extent, and you can't say anything against that—' I felt I could, and moreover that I did not agree with Tiberius's snap definition of Epicureanism, but it was too hot to argue — 'Didn't Jesus say something about not hiding your money in a bushel?'

'Candle under a bushel or money in a napkin. You pays your money and you takes your choice.'

'Okay, well I'm not going to hide my money under a candle under a napkin under a bushel, but use everything I've got. Nothing wrong in that, is there?'

'Provided you use it in the right direction.'

'Yes, that's a point, I hadn't thought of that. Most of the things I want to do seem to be unconnected with right and wrong. I've had over a quarter of my life already — maybe a far higher proportion — and what have I done with it? Alexander had conquered half the world by the time he was my age.'

'Caesar was a diner-out till he was forty and Jesus was thirty when he started his ministry.'

'Jesus had a long course of being good and self-sacrificing behind Him, carpentering, supporting His widowed mother, taking care of His little brothers and sisters. That's what I could never manage. Anyone can be crucified—'

'Quite. Look at the number of criminals that are, every year.'

'You know what I mean. It's the day-to-day goodness that's hard. And there's nothing that can put an end to the struggle between good and evil in a man except death. You can't deliver yourself over wholly to one or the other.'

That's the sort of reflection that makes you feel life's too long. I want to live at top speed, using every nerve, and die when I'm about thirty.'

'You won't feel like that when you're twenty-nine.'

'You are most horribly damping and practical. Don't you see what I mean?' I saw only too well, but said nothing. 'But there's so much I want to do. I haven't even seen Greece yet, and beyond Greece there's Syria and beyond Syria, Armenia, and beyond that Persia, and India, even China. What makes me want not to die is wondering what's going to happen next. There are so many things to find out. Do you know that some Jews say that Solomon is not dead, but in the Isles of the farthest west?'

"Beloved Harmodius, you never died.

But are still, as men say, in the Isle of the Blest"

and will come again and free Israel, and that 'Alexander is reputed to be shut up in a bottle, like the djinns that are sealed up with the ineffable Name of God, and the Armenians have some ancient king - I forget the name - who is not dead but asleep in a cave in the Caucasus and one day he will wake with his army and make Armenia great again.'

'Jolly if he suddenly appeared and smashed Corbulo and all his troops into little bits.'

'I wish he would. I don't want Armenia to be Roman. If this goes on there'll be no strangeness left in the world, only the Roman Empire, and debased Roman civilisation everywhere, everyone turned out of one mould.'

'Lots of little imitation Quirites.'

'Good God dear, not *Quirites*. Lots of little Graeco-Syrians. They're the modern citizens of the Roman Empire. I'm a foreigner in my own city. Look at me, the last of a long line of distinguished senators and generals.' He sat up, brown from dirt and sun, over-long hair flopping into his eyes, barefoot, his legs scratched where he had slipped

on the tufa rocks and whitened with salt-stains where the sea-water had dried on them. 'Even I am the most typical product of this age, the starving poet living on other people's generosity. The other typical product is the rich freedman, of course. And they're the ones that govern the Empire. I'd rather be what I am. I'm writing again anyway, better than I ever have before, and that's the only thing that matters.'

CHAPTER XV

Anything could happen in Baiae, and the sunshine spiritual and physical that irradiated our lives purged everything, with its brilliant glare, of any surprise. Things happened, or they did not happen, but cause and effect were just meaningless words. The most unlikely people appeared and were greeted like men one saw every day.

We came home once – Castor and I – after lunch to find a thin dark boy sprawled asleep on Tiberius's bed. Castor grabbed him by the arm yelling, 'Dio,' and he awoke with a jump.

'Hullo. Good to see you again. Aphrodite said you'd probably be able to put me up for a few days. This your wife?'

'Yes. Fulvia – Dionysus.'

'Hi. Then you're Castor.'

'Clever boy. What have you been doing with yourself? We haven't heard from you this long while.'

'I was running a nice little receiver of stolen goods business in Corinth together with Hermes. Unfortunately the powers that be got wise to us and we had to beat it. I'm going on to Rome in a couple of days where I've got contacts in the same line of business. Hermes made for Alexandria.' So he stayed, for a good deal more than a couple of days and finally left, promising to contact us through Ascytos. As he left he said, 'I can't think why we always thought you two were indistinguishable. You're alike certainly, but perfectly easy to tell apart when you're seen together.' This was true if wounding. Castor had hardly had time to age since his baptism, but there was a hard line between his brows and wrinkles across his fore-

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head, evidence of troubles that could make no imprint on a divine face.

Then there was Giton. He came reeling into the gods' pub, bore down on us yelling, 'Hallo-allo-allo, how are you folks,' and sat down at our table.

'And now, ladies and gentlemen,' said Tiberius, 'here we have the celebrated actor Lucianus in the title role of Canace in Labour' (this was one of the Emperor's parts). 'Rah-rah-rah!' Giton decided that it would be too complicated to think up an answer to that one and instead slapped Quintus hard on the back, yelling, 'How's my dear brother-in-law this evening?'

'Alive, thank you,' said Quintus, leaning away from Giton ready to duck if he tried another assault. 'How's my dear si 'or?'

'What, haven't you heard?'

'No. I hear nothing. I'm deaf in case you didn't know.'

'Well, poor dear, it was very sad. But quite unbecoming of course. Not in the wife of my standing. Of person of my standing. Rich affair with love-affair – yes (rich affair with love man. Rich man. Rich love affair). But not – repeat not – he tried to slap Quintus on the back again, but Quintus was under the table like a rabbit – 'not run off with the major-domo. And all the silver. Specially all the silver. That was a month ago and haven't heard anything of 'em since. Silver neither. Had to get rid of them. Not . . . silver of course. Ha, ha, not the silver.' He slapped Pollux on the back, Quintus still being under the table but Pollux simply beckoned to Mars and between them they slung him out.

It was at the pub too that we heard about Julian. How the soldier at the next door table identified Tiberius I don't know, but he suddenly yelled across to him: 'Hey, weren't you a friend of Julian's?'

'Yeah, I knew him well enough. I did a bit of litigation for his father. That was my first case in fact. And later he had a room over where we lived. Why, d'you know him?'

'Come over and tell us what he's up to.' The man moved over with his wine; he was a short dark man of about twenty; judging from his accent, he was from the Po valley. When he got up we saw he had one arm in a sling.

'Wounded soldier, eh?' said Tiberius. 'Where d'you get that? Britain?'

'No, Eastern frontier. That was where I met Julian. Bit of luck running into a friend of his. I don't know a soul here, I come from up North. You just down here for the summer?' Tiberius nodded. 'Your father got a villa here?'

'No. My father's dead now and we're all rather on our beam-ends. At the moment we've got a patron whom we've followed down here for the summer, but how long that'll last, I don't know. Tell us what Julian's up to now though.'

'Well, none of us really know now, but we've heard a lot of rumours. Lot of people blamed him for what he did but I reckon most of us'd do the same in his place. What happened was that he mopped it up big one night in a crap game - I think more to the tune of several millions (myself I think the dice were loaded, but I can't prove that) and he pulled out and no one's ever seen him since. Pretty serious business of course. We were right in the front line, but can you see anyone staying on to be killed with a fortune in his pocket? I know I wouldn't.' He laughed loudly. Obviously he was the sort who talks like that all the time and then dies with all wounds in front. 'So of course it doesn't do for him to stay in the Empire, 'cause if he's caught that's probably finish as far as he's concerned. They say that he's now settled down somewhere on the Persian Gulf and is running a trading business, importing stuff from India and selling it to Syria or somewhere. He's reputed to have an absolute palace, with hordes of slaves, and about half a dozen luscious Persian beauties to keep him warm in bed.'

'Shouldn't think you'd want keeping warm in the Persian Gulf,' said Quintus. 'So he's got everything that heart could desire except another civilized person to talk to. How nice!'

'Can't be much cop, the Persian Gulf,' agreed Tiberius. 'How extraordinary though, I shouldn't have thought he was in the least the person to do a thing like that. Tremendously solid and dependable, I should have thought he was.'

'Not where money was concerned,' said I. 'Member how he was always concerned with going up in the world, and thought that money was the way? He quite obviously thought that money could buy everything including happiness.'

'Well, can't it?' said the soldier. 'Here, I'd better be going now, or else the decurion'll tear a strip off me all right when I get back. So long.'

'So long.' There was a short silence, which Tiberius broke by saying, 'My God, what an awful story. I wonder how long it'll be before he finds out his mistake.'

'Well, at least he's still alive,' said Pollux.

'Yes, but what a life. There'll come a moment, probably in the not so distant future, when he'll wish he'd died young and died fighting.'

'Romantic! You'll feel differently when you're a bit older.'

'You attach a damn' sight too much importance to long life,' said Castor. 'Thank God, I'm mortal.'

Pollux looked up obviously about to retort, 'Thank God I'm not,' but restrained himself in time. The ragged man who was as usual polishing the wall with his greasy head at the edge of a group of spivs, bawled out, 'Yes, you do well to thank God. Thank Him from the bottom of your heart. Thank Him that there's a limit set to your time of torment here on earth, though there is none set to that of the sinners below, where that group of Ishmaelites will

spend eternity.' ('Shut up,' chorused the spivs.) He sidled along the wall until he was staring down at Castor. 'Thank God that you're mortal, that you're not like me.'

Castor looked up sharply. 'You're not—?' but a glance at his face washed out any possibility of his being divine. 'Here, sit down and have a drink.' The ragged man sat down and grabbed his glass without any relaxation of his habitual scowl. 'Yeah, you can thank God you're not immortal.' We waited, fascinated for a further exposition of this theme. Finally the man started again in a mechanical recitation, as if he had told it to hundreds of people before, 'He came past my door one morning, just before the Pass-over it was, must have been thirty years ago at least, before any of you were born, yes, past my door he came on the road to the gallows. In Jerusalem this was, I was a cobbler there, back in old Pilate's time. He was absolutely all in, he was and do you wonder, the floggings they give them, barely walk he couldn't, let alone carry the beam of the cross, they had to get someone else to do that. Everyone was jeering at the criminals, specially this one, and he nearly passed out in front of my shop, so I leant out of the door and yelled at him, "Get a move on now, death won't wait." So he drew himself up — made everyone else look like a dwarf, he did, though he wasn't a tall man either — and looked at me with eyes that'd crack a diamond to splinters, and said: "Yes, I'm moving on, but you'll stay — you'll stay till I come to earth again." And the soldier kicked him and shoved him forward. So I followed him right up to the gallows, and they stuck him up there, with his name and the crime he was executed for written on a bit of paper nailed above him. That was a funny thing too, I couldn't understand it first but someone else told me they'd nabbed him on a treason trial, some private spite of the High Priest's it was really, hauled him up in front of Pilate, saying he'd been saying he was King. First Pilate wouldn't touch it but finally the priests said: "Fine subject

of Caesar you are letting this man go round openly denying Caesar's authority, saying he's King," and Pilate got panicky, the way Romans do if you so much as mention the word king, and wrote the order for his execution. But when it came to writing this label to stick above him, he didn't say anything about treason, he just wrote: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The priests suggested that it might be better to correct it to: "Pretended King of the Jews," but he told 'em what to do with their corrections. Real slap across the face for the priests, it was.'

'You a Sadducee?' asked Tiberius.

'Yeah, what d'you think? King of the Jews. He could have been too if he'd wanted. Eyes like that, men would follow him anywhere. As it was he chose to be some kind of crack ~~rat~~ preacher and the only throne he had was the gallows.' He was silent for a while and then went on: 'First I just took it as a joke. "You'll wait till I come back to earth," but later I believed it, and at first I was glad of it, but later I longed for death, and now I can never have it, I saw him die and no man returns from the dead. Now I feel I'd go through his agony, if only I knew there'd be death at the end, darkness and I could forget.' He sat silent a while longer, and then got up and shuffled back to his usual place. We talked to him fairly often after this; sometimes he just swore at us and stayed where he was, but sometimes he would sit and drink with us. Castor, Tiberius and I tried to pump him about what Christ was like, but he never said much more than he had said at first. Finally, we left him to Tiberius who argued away happily with him in Aramaic about life after death.

The most disturbing and unlikely arrival was Gaius. We came back to the flat one morning after collecting our dole from Ascyltos to find him sitting on the floor, having already eaten most of our lunch.

'And what are you doing here, rat?' said Tiberius.

'Couldn't stand that old bitch. She kept on fussing round'

me calling me poor little orphan boy and things. Absolutely got in my hair she did.'

'She's the cat's grandmother, I was always told.'

'Aunt Valeria. So I thought I'd be better off with you.'

'Oh you did, did you? How did you get down here?'

'Got a lift from a Greek I met in the road. He paid the meals and everything. I told him my father was dead and I was coming down here 'cause I had some relations here who'd take me in. Quite true. So there you are.'

'Well, you'll bloody well earn your keep since you aren't bringing money in like the rest of us. You can start off by washing those dishes over there.'

'Wash 'em yourself, Mr Bossy, I'm not going to do your dirty work for you.' He picked up his sandals and strolled out, whistling.

His arrival had a thoroughly bad effect on Tiberius, who was already becoming discontented. At first he had enjoyed himself immensely at Ascyltos's where he dined frequently, expressing his opinions with a fervency and truthfulness that delighted his host, but one day one of the guests sent him a manuscript poem for criticism. Tiberius sent it back with a note saying: 'I read the first ten lines, and that was more than enough. Why don't you stick to money-making which by all accounts you can do properly? It doesn't even scan.' Ascyltos was delighted with this, and only then did Tiberius realize that he was kept as a licensed buffoon whose sole mission in life was to be rude to Ascyltos's guests. He promptly shut up like a clam, only speaking when spoken to and that with scrupulous politeness. Gaius arrived in time to aggravate him even worse, and the two quarrelled almost every time they met. There was, for instance, the incident of the puppy. This was a starving half-grown black dog that wandered into the flat one day. We enquired round the other inhabitants of the block but none of them had lost

it. Quintus suggested drowning the brute, Aquila mildly said that you couldn't possibly do that, Pollux said turn it out into the street again, Titus said: 'Nice bo-wo,' and Tiberius said, 'Certainly we can't turn it out. After all, it's in the same position as us. I'll have it if no one else wants it,' and set it down to a meal of fried-fish scraps.

After a long pause he suddenly announced: 'Bull,' in the voice of Pythagoras crying, 'Eureka.'

'Bull what?' I said.

'His name. You know:

*He came from Malta and Eumelus says
He had no better dog in all his days;
We called him Bull; he went into the dark
All night those roads we cannot hear him bark.*

'I think that's an ill-omened sort of name. Besides he's not a Maltese terrier.'

'Doesn't matter. Bull suits him, with that broad chest and thick neck. Anyway, he's my dog.'

Towards evening Gaius came in, laid hold of the unfortunate creature and said, 'Oh, bags I. I know this sort, he'll make a champion ratter when he's older. I shall call him *Corsets*.'

'Gaius Cornelius, that's *my* dog, and his name's Bull. Put him down *at once*.'

'Who says?'

'I say, and I found him first.'

'Couldn't we share him?'

'No, we couldn't. I've been had that way before. He'll be your dog when you want to teach him beastly tricks like jumping through hoops and walking on his hind-legs and things and he'll be my dog when he makes a mess and someone has to clear it up. I know. Look' – he extracted a coin 'from his purse – 'go and buy yourself sweets or something, and forget about it. You wouldn't get that out of me if I weren't so weak.'

Gaius looked at the coin in disgust, bolted and did not reappear till after dinner.

'We kept something for you,' said Tiberius, 'but I don't suppose you'll want any if you've been gorging yourself on sweets.'

'I haven't. I invested it.'

'How much?'

'Thousand per cent I made.'

'No, but how?'

'Dice.'

'Oh you little horror. What are you going to do with the proceeds?'

'They're towards my chariot and team I'm getting when I'm sixteen. I've been saving up for two years now.'

'My God, and you never told me. You are a mercenary little brute, aren't you?'

'Better than being always in debt like you. You're feckless, that's what you are. You'll never get anywhere.'

'Don't want to, not what you'd call anywhere. Moreover it's time you're in bed.'

'Who, me? Not likely, I'm going out with the boys this evening, soon as I've finished supper.'

The boys were a gang of juvenile spivs aged between ten and fourteen who were the curse of Baiae. They racketed round all day and half the night, throwing mud at passers-by, overturning stalls in the market-place, nicking fruit off the barrows, going through wine shops like a tornado, breaking into houses for a 'dare', tripping up drunks and rolling them in the dirt. Sometimes one of them was caught and got what he deserved, more often than not. They were a mixed crowd, Roman, Greek, Syrian, Jew, even one or two Negroes, slaves' children, millionaires' children, knights', priests', senators' children. They caused more trouble. Gaius came in late one night with a black eye, announcing, 'Corsets killed three rats today.'

'His name is Bull,' said Tiberius, 'and he's my dog, and — crescendo — how many times must I tell you not to take him out ratting without my permission?'

'All the rest of the gang brought their dogs.'

'Well, Bull ain't your dog. You can take him ratting if you ask permission but not otherwise. I'm sick and tired of telling you that. In fact, I'm sick of you altogether, and if I could find any way of getting you to Como, I'd send you back to Uncle Quintus here and now. You and your bloody gang have done nothing but make life unendurable for all of us ever since you came here, and let me tell you that when we get back to Rome you're going straight back to Uncle Quintus's and you're not going to be hanging round our place the whole time. Now go to bed; you should have been there hours ago.'

'How can I go to bed early if all of you stay up talking till all hours?'

'Go to bed, Gaius,' said Pollux, 'and if you take Tiberius's dog ratting again without asking permission, I'll give you such a whipping that you won't be able to sit down for a week.'

Gaius had been beaten once already by Pollux, and Pollux was the only one of us for whom he had any respect at all, so he went to bed without another word.

Quintus was the only one of us who enjoyed the latter part of our stay in Baiae. This he spent furiously working against time on his paintings of the Trojan war which he was doing in Ascylos's dining room. He worked from dawn to the last of the daylight, often working while a dinner-party was in progress, kept several slaves busy mixing colours and cleaning brushes, press-ganged Pollux and Tiberius, even Aquila and me into helping paint the background and easier bits, made us all pose for him, cursing us for looking wooden and hurling saucers of paint at us when we moved, and in short abused everyone who came near him and made a thorough exhibition of himself.

Tiberius despised this and said that only a bad artist had to advertise his talents by being temperamental, a true artist behaved normally and did not make a point of being deliberately eccentric. Quintus replied that no one could throw more temperaments than Tiberius and he himself knew he was a true artist so he didn't give a damn what anyone else said. Castor said that two cocks cannot live on one dunghill nor two artists under one roof and on being asked what that was a quotation from, said he had made it up then and there. Tiberius said surely he didn't think Quintus was a true artist, to which he replied: 'He has a foul and twisted view of the universe, but I'm bound to admit that he puts it across all right. Technically, of course, he's superb.' This was a true, if somewhat harsh, criticism. Against a background of magnificent colonnades and buildings with behind them the illimitable sky was a Trojan War that looked more like the fights that raged between the boys of Gaius's gang than the battles of gods and heroes. But then the people and still more the gods in Quintus's paintings were always utterly vile. I remember once with Tiberius and Quintus looking at the front of one of the temples of Baiae, a façade of mathematical beauty, flawless, and in front of it the usual dirty, verminous street child sitting picking his nose. 'There you have 'em,' said Quintus. 'The work of man and the work of nature. The perfect, and the abysmally awful. Curious that man can only make beautiful things, himself he remains as insignificant as that child.' 'No,' said Tiberius, 'you're wrong. The child's the important thing there. The building's perfect, and consequently it's bounded by its perfection and can never grow any greater, but the child may become a saint or a Caesar. Man's imperfection is his strength, it means that there is no limit set to his greatness.'

The eve of our departure came, and we went out in a body and whooped it up in a succession of pubs while

Gaius went out with the gang and behaved even more disgracefully than usual. We likewise behaved abominably. We danced down the streets yelling and when an old woman with her head tied up in a duster cursed us from a top-floor window, we stopped and sang love-songs at her till she threw the contents of a slop-pail at us. We told the watch that Ascyltos's house was on fire, whereat they rushed off there and smashed three valuable vases before they could be got rid of. We had the inexpressible pleasure of catching one of the most demoniacal of Gaius's gang and tossing him in Castor's cloak. As the night wore on the barrier which alcohol raises between oneself and the rest of the world became more noticeable. Castor turned cartwheels up and down the street, pausing only to shout: 'Here we are again,' and 'What ho, she bumps,' and similar remarks; Aquila sat on the ground and barked at the dogs; Quintus became tearful and complained that like all true artists he was unappreciated; Pollux made some attempt to comfort him but had to break off in the middle to be sick. I supported myself against a wall and regarded the others with what I hoped was sober amusement, and Tiberius armed himself with a stick and stood in the middle of the road, announcing that he was Horatius keeping the bridge against the Etruscans. For some time no Etruscans appeared, and he was left to stamp up and down and declaim from Virgil to his heart's content; finally a party of revellers appeared from an alley and came towards us. Tiberius waved the stick and shouted: 'Stand, in the Emperor's name! Who goes there, friend or foe?' but Castor grabbed him by one arm and pulled him back against the wall, saying, 'Look out you fool, can't you see who it is?' Past us swept a figure with that unmistakable bull neck and intent, maniacal scowl, in a flurry of imperial purple.

'Pass foe, all's very far from well,' muttered Tiberius, watching their retreating backs. 'Oh, why didn't I have a

sword not a stick, I could easily have killed him, no guards, I'll never have another such chance again. It's high time somebody murdered him, not fit to live, much less rule.' And raising one arm in a gladiatorial salute he yelled down the street, 'Hail Caesar, we about to die salute you.' •

CHAPTER XVI

The return to Rome was a relief. One seemed to live at a slower pace, in a more real world. Rome seemed very solid and immovable after Baiae, the rich quarters backed by real money, the slums solidly built, if shabby, not like the cheap jerry-built smartness of Baiae that deteriorated so quickly, giving the impression of a town that had grown up overnight, and might at any time vanish overnight too. Arrival in Rome meant a new search for lodgings; we had lived cheap in Baiae – the man who let us our rooms had made a special price' for us, but then everything in Baiae is a special price – but in the Suburra we found rooms as cheap, with the same dirt and bugs and peeling plaster, and the same well-remembered sour smell. The difference was that our new lodgings overlooked a main street and there was a perpetual noise of traffic all night. In the end one got used to it and slept, but to begin with it was murder.

It was a bad autumn. For the moment we had a roof over our heads and enough money to live on, but it was only a temporary refuge and we felt no more secure about the future than we did before Ascytos took us on. There was no question of Pollux and Quintus leaving us and getting rooms elsewhere; we clung together, finding safety in numbers. We lived a hand to mouth existence, with seldom more than a few coppers between us left over from one day to the next; tomorrow seemed impossibly distant, and next spring a time that would never come, or would come only to find us dead. Only Castor and I found in Titus any strong reason for keeping alive.

It was an autumn of disaster for many of our friends;

Cornelia had a miscarriage late in November, Marcus broke his ankle and for some time the doctors were in doubt as to whether he would ever be able to walk again without crutches; worst of all, Persius died quite suddenly of some unexplained stomach disease. This hit Tiberius hardest; he paced about our rooms, complaining that he couldn't even write a decent poem to comfort himself and that Paul so far from being comforting about Persius's prospects in the next world had, quite literally, damned him. 'Not that I believe everything Paul says,' said Tiberius, 'mostly he talks too loud to hear what anyone else is saying but there's an uncomfortable deal of truth in all his bellowing.'

We were all disagreeably conscious by this time that Ascyltos was thoroughly sick of us; in taking on Quintus, he hadn't bargained for taking on a horde of cousins, lovers, dependants of cousins, with husbands and children and so on, and in any case I think he was getting rather bored with Quintus. He must have found the rest of us a sore trial. It was trying, for instance, when one night Marcus, very drunk, rode a horse into his dining room for a bet and was with difficulty restrained from jumping it on to the table; it was still more trying when Tiberius told him that if he read books because he wanted to be cultured, not because he enjoyed them, he would infallibly go straight to Hell when he died — he was not paying Tiberius to be rude to himself; but the final blow came from — of all people — Quintus.

Castor, Tiberius, Aquila and Pollux returned one morning from their daily journey to fetch their dole from Ascyltos to find Quintus just emerged from his bedroom with a shocking hangover. Castor laid hold of him at once and started shaking him: 'You little rat, what have you done now? I suppose it's nothing to you that we've lost the only source of income we've got, I suppose it's nothing to you if we starve—'

'Here, let him alone,' said Pollux, and Castor, rather to my surprise, did.

'Well, what am I supposed to have done?' said Quintus.

'It seems,' said Tiberius coldly and deliberately, 'that Ascyltos took offence at one of your paintings which he seemed to think was meant as a satire on your and his love-affair—'

'You know about that, do you?' said Quintus.

'Know about it? All Rome knows about it.'

'I didn't,' said Pollux.

'Oh it was awfully sordid, you couldn't call it a *love*-affair. I suppose it was a bit like us, that drawing; so are we all out on the ear now?'

'Yes, I suppose you can always depend on your marvellous sex-appeal to get another patron but it isn't so easy for the rest of us.'

'Boring old man, I'm glad I'm shut of him. Oh, my head.'

There seemed no reason for staying in the flat any longer, especially as a stunning row between Quintus and Pollux seemed imminent, so we picked up Titus and went. When we came home they seemed to have calmed down, but Pollux sat very silent throughout supper. Quintus, who had a cut across his nose, talked loudly and continuously, but addressed no remark to Pollux, except that he said to Tiberius — but at Pollux — I forget apropos of what: 'Of course for a true artist, his art must always come first, that's why a love-affair or marriage is so difficult for him,' and Pollux scowled and said nothing. Another man might have gone out and got drunk or picked up a tart either to take the mind off or because he felt it was the conventional thing to do, but Pollux was not like that, and simply hung about doing nothing until bedtime. Then he and Quintus retired to their bedroom and started arguing again — short sulky sentences dropped into an awful silence. Next morning we found Pollux asleep on the floor in Aquila and

Tiberius's room wrapped in a blanket. Quintus stuck this sort of thing for one more day and night and then took himself off to his father's. 'I can't see what he's fussing about,' he said to Aquila, in blank incomprehension, 'he must see I didn't love Ascylos.'

Meanwhile for us there was the money problem. Even pawning everything we could, we could not keep going for more than a week and after that there seemed no possible source of cash. Uncle Marcus would not, and Uncle Quintus could not take us in, and even if Tiberius could bring himself to sink his pride and ask Cornelia for help, she was still too ill from her miscarriage to put us up, and anyway Subrius was not going to have his house filled with bohemian young men even if one of them was his brother-in-law. When we were finally flung out of our lodgings – there is no getting credit in a quarter where everyone lives from hand to mouth – we deposited Titus on her, feeling that we could not make him a martyr to our sense of honour, or our pride, or whatever it was that prevented us from borrowing up to the hilt from our friends.

How we stuck those few days of homelessness without our pride breaking down, I don't know. It rained horribly, and we trailed about the streets dragging wet dogs after us on lengths of rope and the sole fell off one of my shoes. There was no money for drinks or shaves for the boys or even food. We got one or two dinner parties during that time and in between whiles we lived on what food we brought away from them. Cornelia's house we used as a sort of base to change for dinner etc, but we slept where we could. Under archways and colonnades of temples and the table at parties. After the second night even Tiberius had ceased to think it was fun. He had got a cold, and Bull had slipped his lead – not a difficult thing with his thick neck – and run away completely. 'I told you it was an ill-omened name,' I said.

Of means of money-making there was still no sign. Dionysus suggested that we should come in with him on the stolen goods business, and when we refused, said: 'I tell you there's no earthly risk in the thing provided you don't go in for any false economy over bribes.' However we said no, politely but firmly. Then there were a lot of friends who offered us tips for a dead cert. On the stock market, or the games - fine if only we'd had any money, but we hadn't. There were ideas that the boys should hire themselves out as professional claqueurs to the chief leaders of the various factions, that they should start as demolition contractors ('Wouldn't need any tools,' said Castor, 'give most of these houses a kick and they'd fall to bits') that we should work our way down to Baiae and throw our lot in with Hercules and his pub (why it was okay to sponge on the gods though not on our friends or co-religionists, I don't know). Tiberius even had a wild idea of getting Uncle Marcus to try and jockey him into a commission in some legion stationed at Rome. Seeing that Tiberius had done precisely a fortnight's military training and nearly driven his sergeant to suicide, principally owing to his inability to tell his right hand from his left without long and careful thought and a lot of waving his arms about, I felt that this was a very forlorn hope indeed. So did he.

By the morning of the fifth day we had reached a breaking-point. Aquila had gone off on his own pursuit (still in a perfectly folded though not frightfully clean toga), Castor was hunting for some means of making money, and Tiberius and I were left wandering round the Forum in the rain. We found a coin lying on the ground and beat a knot of small children to it by about two seconds. They were loud in their condemnation, unable to believe that any grown-ups, unless actually in rags, could possibly be in need of money. 'Food,' said Tiberius, 'my stomach's wrapping round my backbone, it's so empty.' We walked

over to the nearest stall and after careful discussions bought a slab of yellow, oily bread as being the most filling for the money, divided it into three bits (Aquila foraged for himself) and sat down on the steps of a temple to eat.

Tiberius finished his and licked his fingers carefully to get the last of the oil from them. 'D'you suppose Lucius'll be able to raise any money?'

'Not a hope, I should think.'

'Any idea where he's trying?'

'No. Don't suppose he had any idea himself.'

'Well, I suppose sooner or later I shall have to sink my pride and borrow from Cornelia. Or perhaps Uncle Marcus could pull strings for me.'

'What strings?'

'God knows.'

He shivered and sneezed a couple of times, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. Occasionally he wrenched at his tunic, which had shrunk, in a vain attempt to get it to cover his knees; otherwise he just sat staring miserably into the distance. Except for his five days' beard, he did not look much different from any of the little beggar-boys who swarmed in the Forum. He had the uncomprehending misery of a child who cannot understand why it rains on its birthday. Castor had taken the only cloak in an attempt to look reasonably well-dressed; both their togas had been popped long ago. Tiberius in a thin tunic stared at the wet Forum and shivered.

Finally he said, 'Of course the trouble is, I've not really been brought up to do anything. Always this idea that there'll be money for me to live on, while I practise a totally unprofitable career at the bar and perhaps later on dabble in politics at immense cost to myself. White-handed aristocrat, incapable of doing anything useful.' He looked critically at his hands which were dirty and scarred and covered with ink. 'Not that I blame any-

body but myself. It's hopeless to blame other people for your own misfortunes. Meantime I go on sponging on you.'

At this moment Castor appeared. He had shaved and was carrying a bundle done up in a napkin which he dumped down on my knees. I opened it: it contained a hot roast chicken. 'Darling, how on earth . . . ?'

'Ah! Learn of the wise and perpend.' He sat down on the steps beside me, tore a leg off the chicken. 'First I went to Marcus.'

'You haven't been borrowing off him, have you?' said Tiberius.

'No, of course not. Oh by the way, your cloak.' He unfastened it and handed it over. 'No, I just went to see him and said what did he suggest, and he said the Greens needed another driver at any rate while he was away, so he sent me along to the Green stables with a glowing letter of recommendation. I've handled his team once or twice and he knows I can drive. They couldn't try me out with a full team at the stables in this rain, but they took me into the covered school, and put me upon a horse to see what I could do with him and I rode him round a bit and they signed me up, at least till Marcus's ankle's better, perhaps permanently if I acquit myself well. I didn't find out till afterwards that that horse had killed three men.'

'How?' said Tiberius.

'Bucked 'em off and rolled on 'em, or something.'

'Well, didn't it try and do that to you?'

'Bucked a bit at the beginning, but I got him under control. Probably the other blokes had been frightened by being told he was vicious, and once you're frightened you're done. Anyway, I explained the financial situation to them and they advanced me something, so I've got about enough to carry us over the next few days.'

'When are you supposed to be racing?' I said.
'Day after tomorrow, if the weather clears.'
'It won't, you see,' said Tiberius.
But there was a glorious clear sunset that night, and next day was dry and cloudless.

CHAPTER XVII

So that night found us and Titus once again installed in the usual two dirty rooms. 'Life back to normal,' said Castor as we lay in bed that night. 'Perhaps if I get this job permanently we may be able to rent a small house.'

'I like life as it is,' I said. 'Houses mean slaves and various complications. I don't feel I'd be up to it.'

'I know.' He rolled over, and curled one arm round me. 'This is where we belong. Really we're just immigrants, bloody foreigners, and this God-knows-where-the-next-meal-is-coming-from existence is our normal way of life. Our incursion into high society was just an accident. Our level is with the scroungers and hungry young men and slightly shady types, hanging on to the fringes of upper-class intellectual and bohemian circles, occasionally admitted to the larger dinner parties that half Rome goes to and given the cheapest wine and worst food. I don't mind. In fact I like it that way. But it'd be Hell without you.'

'Would it? You're suddenly being very loving for such a long-married husband. Second wife too.'

'Second wife, but first love. Gods don't love.'

'You weren't a god when you first married'

'No more I was. Well, I was a boy then. Boys don't love either. God. I am so happy, I suppose it's working and having somebody to work for.'

'You were working for me before when you were in the army.'

'I know, but I didn't enjoy that. Horses is different. I've been sickening for the feel of reins between my fingers,

not just taking Marcus's chariot out for a spin, but really working as a pro. I wonder if they'd let me help on the breaking and training side. Luck knowing Marcus, I'd never have got this job, however good I was, without his recommendation.' He sat up and started taking off his tunic. 'It's a weight off my mind, at last I feel I'm doing my duty as a husband by you. Should be quite well paid, too.'

'You have done your duty by me. It's moral, not financial, support one really needs from a husband.'

'Do I give you that? I should have thought I, least of all, would be capable of doing that.'

'Of course you do, the way no one else could.' I held up my arms to him and he fell into them. Followed a long pause then - 'Why the hell do women wear such complicated underclothes? Can you undo this stay-lace?'

'Not now. You've got it into a knot. Not without light and about a quarter of an hour's picking at it.'

'I can't wait that long. Damn it, I can afford to buy you any number of stay-laces now. I'm going to earn masses of money and load you with jewels and fulfil your lightest wish.' He snapped the thong and started unravelling it through the eyelet-holes.

Pollux turned up next afternoon when Castor had gone off to inspect the team he was to race next day, and I was trying to clean out our rooms, helped by Tiberius who carried buckets of water up five flights of stairs from the well in the yard. He came in rather guiltily, stared silently for a minute, and finally said, 'Quintus here?'

'He's at his father's, isn't he,' said I.

'No, I went round, and they said he'd left this morning and said he wasn't coming back.'

'I think he's at some kind of phallic whoopee,' said Tiberius. 'I ran into him in the Forum this morning.'

'Some kind of what?'

'Rites of Cybele, or something. He was being tremendously mysterious and not-for-the-uninitiated about it.'

'Oh. But he's not living with you?'

'No bloody fear.'

'Oh.' He stared at us a minute longer, and then slouched out.

About an hour later Quintus appeared. 'Seen Pollux?'

'He was here about an hour ago looking for you,' said Tiberius. 'I thought you were supposed to be engaged in ritual copulation or some such thing at the moment.'

'My dear cousin, your notions about the sacred mysteries are absolutely fatuous. (I thought it was your beloved Christians who did that anyway.) No that's this evening. Can I stay the night here?'

'We haven't got a bed for you,' I said.

'I can sleep on the floor.'

'Row at home?' said Tiberius.

'Not particularly. Only my stepmum insists on treating me as if I were about six, and keeps on about have I changed my shoes and hadn't I better wear an extra tunic this weather, and Papa mumbles away about why can't I go into the army, or be called to the bar or even try for a quaestorship. Can you see me in the army? So you see there's nowhere I can sleep except here.'

'Try going on the streets,' said Tiberius. 'You'd get a bed that way.'

'Sleep here if you like,' I said. 'Only you'll have to sleep on the floor.'

By the next day Pollux and Quintus had made it up. Quintus was sick of living at home and had never quite understood what the quarrel was about anyway; Pollux had an irrational feeling that because Quintus had been at any rate one cause of the split between him and Castor he must hold on to him at all costs. So he came and slept on the floor in Tiberius's room for a couple of nights too. At first he tried to get Castor to wangle him a job with

the Greens; then, when Castor quite rightly pointed out that he had no influence whatsoever with them, being only a stopgap, he managed to get a job with the Whites, through a friend of Dionysus's, who did a lot of horse-dealing for them. He and Quintus moved into a room in the same block as us and life went on much as before.

Marcus's ankle healed, but Castor was kept on the pay-roll racing and also, as he had hoped, helping to train young colts. He was now earning quite a lot, and on the strength of this, he and Pollux rented a small house, part of a block which consisted mainly of some senator's mansion, with a few small shops set into the front of it. The others moved in with us, Tiberius still bitterly lamenting that he hadn't got the money to support himself. Most people were not so scrupulous: they came to stay the night, and stayed a fortnight or a month, eating our food, drinking our wine, quarrelling with us and each other, in the case of one, writing viciously horrid satirical verses about all of us. I remember he called me 'a horse-faced bluestocking' a description which excited derision, rather than annoyance. The position was made worse by the fact that Pollux and Quintus's valet, whom Pollux had bought with the proceeds of his first race – an insufferable young man, who did nothing but wear Pollux's clothes, deluge himself with Quintus's scent, and lounge about the house surveying everyone else as if they were worms – had numberless hungry friends who, when they had nowhere else to go, used to move in on us. One way and another, the house was always full of people, mostly complete strangers to me, coming in and out at all sorts of odd hours, often drunk, sometimes bringing tarts in, sleeping on the floor, or in other people's beds in the daytime. One man stayed for about a fortnight, each of us thinking him to be a friend of one of the others, until it was finally discovered that no one had the faintest idea who he was, that he had

simply walked into the house one evening, seeing a party going on and the door open, and finding that no one flung him out had stayed ever since. Actually I don't suppose we often had more than about half a dozen people staying in the house besides ourselves, if that, but it seemed like hundreds.

The new year opened well for us. There was money coming into the house, more than enough even for our extravagant tastes; we had no notion of going without new clothes, jewellery, books, so long as we had money in our pockets to pay for them and took only too literally Christ's saying about taking no thought for the morrow. Even so, Castor and I managed to save a bit against evil days. Quintus, too, was earning: he had found some pub-keeper who had vague aspirations to being thought cultured and persuaded him to pay him to fresco the place inside and out. He started off with two very realistic pictures of the young ladies of the establishment – too realistic to be good advertisement they were – on each side of the door, and went on to cover the inside walls with what he called 'an epitome of modern life', whatever that may have been. Quintus's vocabulary was apt to be erratic. The effect was pretty horrid and not at all likely to attract customers, but the proprietor was pleased, thinking that because it was beastly, it must be real high art. Quintus was thoroughly satisfied. 'Such a relief to be working for somebody who doesn't think he knows all about art and keep on trying to give you advice. Besides, now I'm doing it all myself, instead of having slaves to do all the donkey-work. You paint much better when you have to grind your own colours and prepare the surface yourself and everything. You really begin to know how to handle your materials.' As a matter of fact, Tiberius and Aquila did an awful lot of the donkey-work, putting on first the coats of sand-mortar, and then plaster mixed with marble-dust, with the help of some of the slaves, helping grind the colour,

and mix them with lime and some kind of soapy stuff, being sworn at by Quintus because they had mixed them in the wrong proportions, polishing the finally completed murals until they were as smooth as if they had been waxed, and caught the light like a well-kept sword-blade. Quintus meanwhile painted like a demon, ran up and down ladders, fell off planks, trod on saucers of colour and cursed everyone for leaving them about, put them down himself on chairs, forgot about them, sat on them, laid on plaster, ground and mixed colours, polished, told everyone else to go to hell, and saw himself on the threshold of fame at last.

The twins were in fact both gaining considerable fame. Their heads began to appear on bowls and wine-cups, encircled with green or white rings and presents from various ladies, addressed to 'Metellus White' or 'Metellus Green' arrived frequently at the house. They drank, ate or wore the presents, but gave no encouragement to the senders.

Now we had a decent home again, we were in a position to give parties. I had no slaves to help with the cooking but usually Tryphaena or my former slave-girl or someone would come in and do dinner for a small fee, or we could get dinner sent in from the bake-house.

Tiberius and I took to going to see Paul very often. Tiberius was at first inclined to treat Paul as a good person to practise Aramaic on, but Paul put a stop to this by talking to him always in excellent Greek, though with a bad accent, and finally won Tiberius's respect by clinching some argument by a quotation from Aeschylus. Castor came along too whenever he was not needed at the stables, and was always hailed with shouts of delight by at least one member of the guard who had known him as an officer. Aquila tended to follow Tiberius about and infuriated Paul by coming and listening and never arguing at all. One day Paul rounded on him in the middle of some discussion and said, 'Well, what do you think?'

'Oh, I think it's all very interesting,' said Aquila, smiling in an embarrassed way.

'But do you agree with what I'm saying or not?'

'Well, it all sounds quite convincing, yes.'

'Then why not be baptized?'

'Oh no, I don't think so.'

Paul made a visible effort to control his temper, and succeeded. 'Look, why do you come here at all?'

'Oh, it's very interesting,' said Aquila vaguely, 'you talk awfully well, you know.'

Paul breathed hard through his nose, opened his mouth once or twice to say something and then thought better of it and shut it. Tiberius started to giggle and Aquila looked rather alarmed and began to wonder what he had done wrong. Finally Paul said in a very gentle voice: 'Don't you see how important this is?'

'Oh, is it?'

'Get out,' bawled Paul, his temper completely getting the better of him. Aquila fled and never came near the place again.

We were living now in a new and hitherto completely unsuspected world: the circus. Our whole being revolved round the festivals, training for them arguing about which horses and jockeys were competing, betting heavily on the races, watching them, wild with excitement, discussing them endlessly afterwards. Quite apart from the other hangers-on, the people who actually worked at the stables, drivers, grooms, trainers, were an odd lot ranging from racketty aristocrats like Marcus down through Italians and Syrians and Nubians to a couple of Gauls and one genuine Briton who answered to the name of Uffuff, this being the nearest anyone could get to his real name. There were Mithraists and Isisites, and people with a particular devotion to Diana or Epona, or even - this amuscd me - to Castor, patron of jockeys and horse-trainers. There were

worshippers of odd little barbarian deities and juju's, even the odd Christian, though most of them disapproved of the games so strongly, because of the gladiators, that they would have nothing to do with them at all. As for amulets, almost every driver would as soon have raced blind drunk or with a broken leg as without his own particular charm. These were various: pendants with the figures of gods on them, or inscribed with words like 'Iao Sabaoth', 'Ibi abi', or 'Abalanathanalba', scarabs, rings made of crucifix nails to keep off demons, leather bags containing invocations written on papyrus, or bits of animals. A nastier form of this amulet mania was the business of burying lead tablets inscribed with prayers to various sinister deities under your rivals' track, which were designed to bring their horses down as they passed over them. Before the start of a day's racing, when the track was being raked over, you would see drivers walking up and down, in theory inspecting the state of the course, in practice grubbing furtively in the ground and dibbling in these plaques with their toes. Castor and I were frankly contemptuous of them - 'The gods are dethroned now,' said Castor, 'how can they be any use? Look at Zeno, ~~who~~ always races with a prayer to me round his neck, and look how much good that does him.' - Tiberius would never have used such things himself and said he didn't believe in them, but still you never knew, Quintus believed fanatically in various talismans of his own and always made Pollux wear one; he also did a good bit of burying curse-tablets on Pollux's account, and there was a first-class fight between him and Pollux when he was found burying one under the Green track just before Castor was racing. 'I hate my brother,' bawled Pollux before a large audience of bookies, grooms, and drivers, 'but I don't want to kill him.' Marcus affected to despise such things, but always wore an amulet provided by the current girl friend, and I know that he attributed his ability to drink almost any quantity of wine with-

out getting drunk to the fact that he wore an amethyst ring.

The gaps between the festivals were spent by many of the drivers in dissipating their earnings, usually on drink and women. Consequently there were numbers of parties to which we were all invited, parties frequented by young bloods who lived hard and gambled high, by the top drivers and actors and *demi-mondaines*. We saw Lucan fairly often at these parties, usually rather drunk and abusing all forms of authority in general and the Emperor in particular. It was at one of these parties that we stumbled over a handsome middle-aged man sitting on the floor. 'Ah, my dear man, who are you? Forgive me if I don't get up.'

Tiberius told him.

'Ah of course, Subrius's Flavus's brother-in-law. May I call you Tiberius? Do call me Gaius. Gaius Calpurnius Piso, you know.' We did know. He was the idol of the lower classes, possessing all the showiest virtues and all the most attractive vices. He was renowned as a champion of the oppressed, a loyal friend and the best-mannered man in Rome; he also sang in opera, with one of his slaves beside him to make the appropriate gestures. He beamed drunkenly up at us; then – 'Do you love our Emperor?'

'Frankly no,' said Tiberius.

'Shake hands, shake hands, you're a man after r' own heart. Just the man I've been wanting to meet. Come and see me when you're drunk, I mean come and see me when I'm sober. Come to dinner. Come to dinner tomorrow and bring all your friends and wives and mistresses' – he waved his arm in my direction – 'and catamites and anyone else you like. Anyone who's an enemy of the Emperor is a friend of mine.'

CHAPTER XVIII

Next evening, having nothing better to do, we turned up at Piso's house, fully expecting to find that he'd forgotten all about the invitation. He hadn't though; Subrius was there, and Lucan, and one or two other people. I was the only woman. It was the usual type of dinner-party; heavy drinking and rather smutty conversation, and going on into the small hours. Only at the end, when most people had drunk themselves into a stupor, Subrius led Castor and Tiberius aside; I followed. 'Look here,' he said, 'are you in on this racket?'

'What racket?' said Castor.

'Look, you've none of you got much cause to love the Emperor, have you?'

'Anything but. There's no one we'd rather see dead.'

'Exactly. And it might be an excellent thing for Rome if there were a new Emperor soon.'

'It would indeed.'

'But Caesar's young. He may live for years yet.'

'So possibly,' said Tiberius, 'it's the duty of a good citizen to see that he dies young.'

Subrius smiled, and looked at each of us in turn, and we began to nod, slowly and deliberately.

Relations between Pollux and Quintus were getting worse and worse. Pollux was, I think, almost as jealous of Quintus's painting as he had been of Ascylos, and the business about the curse-tablet didn't help matters at all. Often there were rows and Pollux would move into another bedroom for a night or so. He drank more too. He turned up one day at the circus, just before his race when

everyone was despairing of his appearing at all, hiccupping and swaying slightly. Castor came in from the course, sweating and victorious. 'My God, are you on next? You look rather one over the eight.'

'I only had two glasses.'

'Well, two glasses is two too many before you're racing. For heaven's sake try and pull yourself together. Been having a row with Quintus?'

'Mind your own bloody business.'

'What's it like underfoot?' said Marcus, who was also racing that race.

'Okay, except by the far turning-post. They've watered it too much there, and it's a bog, especially on the inside track. Well, you're off now, aren't you? Good luck.' Marcus and Pollux climbed into their chariots: the starting signal was given and the four dashed off.

From the beginning it was clear that it was a race between Marcus and Pollux and the rest nowhere. Most of the time they were neck and neck; I had a bet on Marcus and was watching and cheering madly like the rest of the audience. By the seventh and last lap Marcus was just ahead: he came up to the turning-post fingers on the reins to swing the horses round and guide them up the final straight to victory, but the offside trace-horse slipped in the mud bringing the whole thing to the round, and Marcus was flung out, grabbing for his danger to cut the reins that were tied round his waist. Pollux was coming up behind, on the track next to Marcus's, driving wildly, and trying to cut the corner far too close; I saw him trying to bring the horses round, wrenching with both hands at the nearside reins, but it was too late; the stallion's hoof descended on Marcus's head, splitting it neatly in half, and then Pollux's chariot too went over, in a confusion of splintering wood and screaming horses.

Pollux was not hurt, only winded and managed to cut the reins and roll clear. I followed the mob of grooms and attendants who came running out to clear up the mess. Castor came running up too, barefoot and his tunic ungirt yelling, 'Oh, my God, what about Cecrops and Pelops?' These were Pollux's two trace-horses, a pair of superb honey-coloured stallions; Pollux was popularly supposed to enhance their colour by rubbing them with the stuff Quintus bleached his hair with. They had belonged originally to the Greens and Castor had trained them, but then, to his intense wrath, they had been sold, and passed into the hands of the Whites. Now Cecrops, the one who had stove in Marcus's head, was dead under the two pole-horses, and Pelops was pivoting from side to side as far as his trace would allow him, both fetlocks broken, walking on his stumps, with the hoofs sticking out before him like badly made shoes. He alone, in the midst of chaos, remained calm. Castor took one look at them, said 'Oh dear God, and I made those horses to be ruined by a drunken driver,' and then went to the assistance of a groom who was playing tip and run with Marcus's nearside trace-horse, trying to grab the reins and then backing away as it reared and plunged. Castor calmed it down somehow, then, uncurling Marcus's dead fingers from the emerald-studded hilt of his dagger, set about cutting the other horses loose from their harness.

The pole of Marcus's chariot had broken and run into the side of the nearside mare and his other trace-horse was trying to drag itself clear of the wreckage on its forelegs, its hind-quarters paralysed. Pollux's two pole-horses were getting up and falling over each other again and squealing and kicking the chariot to matchwood. Behind me Pollux was being quietly sick. I looked up at the Royal Box and saw the Emperor slowly raising his emerald quizzing-glass to his eye; irrelevantly I thought, 'Why green? It turns the blood browny-grey, it destroys any beauty in death.' Then

I could bear it no longer, and turned and ran to find Tiberius.

I found him sitting on a chest in the harness-room, listening to the talk of an Alexandrian groom. He seemed to be compiling a list of Alexandrian slang, for his tablets were divided into columns, headed drink, girl, pimp, brothel, queer and so on. He looked round as I came in; 'Fulvia, my dear, what on earth's happened?'

'Marcus.'

'What, crashed?'

'Yes, he turned over the chariot, and Publius was just behind him, drove right over him before he could stop. Utterly drunk, Publius I mean.'

'And Marcus? Not dead?'

'Yes, dead.' Tiberius stuffed his tablets down the front of his tunic and followed me back to the starting-gates. They were carrying the body in, Pollux limping behind. Castor came last; 'There's a good man dead, and the two best horses it's ever been my good fortune to handle, as well as three others have to be destroyed, all because my blasted brother has a glass too many before the race.'

Marcus's body was laid out on the table in one of the dressing rooms at the back of the circus, under the Royal Box. Pollux leant against the wall staring at it, his hand, fingers outstretched, palm turned forward, pressed against his mouth, sobbing dry-eyed. Finally Aquila said, 'I persuaded him to sit down and have something to drink while I removed his greaves and breastplate. After a long silence he said, 'Five glasses it was, not two.'

'Well, no wonder,' said Tiberius.

'Don't worry,' said Castor, in a more friendly voice than I had heard him use to Pollux for years, 'it'd probably have happened anyway.'

'It wouldn't. I knew I was cutting that corner too close. Quintus, how can you? Don't, it's disgusting'

Quintus had got a bit of paper from somewhere and was

drawing Marcus's head from different angles. 'It's the first time I've ever seen anyone with their head smashed in,' he said. 'I've got to get it in my mind what it looks like.'

'You've got no heart.'

'Well, of course I'm upset about this, terribly.'

'You're not, you hated him.'

'He was still my cousin. But you must see this is important.'

'I do see Quintus's point,' said Tiberius. I could see he too was taking mental notes of the first experience of violent death to affect him, and filing them all away in his mind.

Outside there was a sudden commotion; 'I tell you, madam, you can't go in there, no, not no one—' then the door opened and a large, middle-aged, over-dressed woman walked in, tears rolling down her cheeks and caking her powder. 'Tell me,' she said, 'I wonder if I may dare ask for something — for just some small memorial.' A further rush of tears. 'Any little thing, just a bit of his tunic, anything.'

'There's 'undreds more of 'em outside,' remarked the first voice through the door; 'all asking for bits of 'is 'air or tunic, or something.'

Tiberius stalked up to the woman like a panther to the kill. 'Woman, my cousin is dead and you come asking for a bit of his tunic,' and she quailed and cringed backward through the door.

Behind Tiberius, Pollux, overcome by the wine, rolled gently off his chair, and lay there on the floor, very white and still.

Followed a grand funeral and then several days of calm. It was on the third day that Castor had to go to the Circus again to help train a new team. He came off the course saying: 'Fulvia, they're vile those horses, I'll never make anything of them. And when I think of Cecrops and

Pelops, and what I did with them. By the time I'd finished with them you could have driven them blindfold over any course in the world. 'Member Cecrops going round the turning post, hugging it so there wasn't a hair's breadth between his wheel-hubs and the post? Good or bad driver, it made no difference to him. And they had to be sold so my drunken brother could kill them.' Then he looked round and saw Pollux just behind him. He nodded good bye to the man he was talking to and came over to us.

'What were you talking to your gladiator-head for?' said Castor.

'Asking him if he wanted a new recruit. He didn't believe I was serious at first, but I assured him I was never more serious in my life.' He looked ghastly: dead white, with dark rings under his eyes.

'You ~~are~~ an . . . ? Oh Pollux, we can't lose you too.'

'Why not?' "Hail Caesar, we about to die salute you." That's the attraction. "About to die." You're right you know. Life's too long, especially if you're immortal.

Come death, you know you must come when you're called,

Although you're a god. And this way and this way I call you.'

'What about Quintus?'

'How ~~do~~ you mean, what about Quintus?'

'I thought you loved him.'

'I do.'

'Well, he'll be jolly upset if you're killed. So if you love him—' he shrugged.

'Oh. Well, I don't see that it's anything to do with me.'

So to the arena he went, all the women in the audience weeping desperately and Quintus hanging round his neck, imploring him not to go. The first time he returned alive; likewise the second time, but soon the inevitable came, Pollux stretched helpless on the sand of the arena, his right

hand still groping for the sword lying an inch or two beyond his fingertips, then the final crippling stroke and the imperial thumb turned inexorably downwards. The body was dragged out through the openings and then down to the cellars below. We went down to claim it, while above slaves were already sanding over the great red patches.

We carried the body home and laid it on one of the beds. Quintus sat down on the floor beside it, weeping uncontrolledly, like a very small child, the tears running down his cheeks and meeting under his chin and dripping off on to his tunic. He made no attempt to wipe them away, or to stop crying. Castor stood watching him for a minute and then crept away to weep in the privacy of his own room. Later he said to me: 'Now he is dead, I can remember only that he was my brother, I can forget the rest. Death is not the worst separation.'

Quintus went out just before dinner, and came in very noisily after midnight. I got up, soon after he came in, to see if he was still weeping by the corpse and possibly to try and comfort him, but passing by his room the door was open, and I saw Quintus in bed, and with him a rather drunk Egyptian. He looked at me from under this man, and raised his eyebrows, saying, as clearly as in words, 'He is dead, but we are alive. And what good does it do to mourn?'

CHAPTER XIX

Somehow, after the first shock, we did not miss the other two as much as was expected. Sometimes I would find myself on the point of addressing a remark to one of them, and then remember with a horrid feeling of emptiness that they were dead, but Quintus was the only one who was badly hit. He sold the valet Pollux had bought, got very drunk very often, brought all sorts of odd people back to the house to sleep with him, and went to every gladiatorial show that was given, howling with the rest of the audience — and a Roman crowd howling for blood in the arena is a horrible sound — and thumbs-downing every defeated gladiator.

In any case, we had other things on our minds which left no room for sorrow. We had none of us taken Subrius's words very seriously, but to our surprise we found there was a conspiracy afoot, with Piso as at any rate the nominal head, to murder Nero. Castor, Tiberius and I fell in at once with this scheme. Aquila followed because we did, and Quintus, after long discussion said: 'Well, I'm on. I don't expect another age of gold, nor do I expect a second Augustus, but it seems to me almost any change must be for the better.' He fished a bit of chalk out of his purse, knelt on the floor and started drawing. A helmet, pushed well back on the head, blank bronze face with staring eye-holes, rounded to fit the back of the head; I suddenly recognized it as the well-known bust of Pericles; but under the helmet, empty eye-sockets, nose a truncated piece of bone, hard row of teeth in the lipless mouth, all the dry naked reality of a skull.

'Quite,' said Tiberius. *'The giants have turned to clay, We, living, are greater than they.'*

'What's that a quote from?'

'Myself. It's not a good poem, and the rest's worse, but it's what you're trying to say, isn't it?'

'I suppose so.' He stood up, and started to rub it out with his foot. 'Anyway I can't resist the chance to have a go at the Emperor.'

We were a mixed bunch of conspirators. Besides Subrius, Piso, Lucan and ourselves, there were two cohort commanders and a few centuriores from the Praetorian, a senator and consul designate, Plautius Lateranus, a man with a vast mansion on the Coelian who was acting, he said, quite disinterestedly, purely for the sake of the Empire, a few knights, a couple of other senators, Flavius Scaevinus, and Afranius Quintianus, both complete debauchees. Quintianus had had a disgustingly scurrilous poem written about him by the Emperor and was bent on wiping out the insult in blood; what Scaevinus was hoping to get out of it God only knows. Last, but not least, there was Epicharis, a little immigrant Greek tart, with no manners and fewer morals, sluttish, uneducated and standing to gain absolutely nothing if we succeeded. Why she joined us, or indeed how she got to know about us remains a mystery.

There were, of course, wheels within whee's; almost from the first there was a military party, headed by Subrius, consisting of the Praetorians, including Castor, Tiberius and myself. Subrius outlined our policy after a meeting at his house, after which he had kept us back. 'Who,' he said casually, 'when we've brought this thing off, do you suppose we'll have as a replacement?'

'Piso, surely?' said one of the centurions.

'Do you think so?' He went on staring carefully at his hands. 'At the moment he's fairly innocuous, but what do you imagine six months of unlimited wealth and power

would do to him? It doesn't seem to me that it makes much difference if we remove a lyre player and substitute an opera singer.'

'So you suggest . . . ?'

'That after it's all over Piso——' he gestured sideways with his hand. 'He's very useful to us as a figurehead, but I think perhaps later on a little accident.'

'Then who do you suggest?'

'Possibly Seneca. I'd have to approach him.'

'So long as we don't have Piso. We don't want the next reign to be just a repeat performance.'

'Seems there's going to be a hell of a lot of killing in this,' said Castor later when we got home.

'Bound to be,' said Tiberius. 'Kill or be killed; only men with the knife at their throats could behave like this.'

'Subrius has got no knife at his throat,' I said. 'I can't quite see what he's aiming to get out of it.'

'I think friend Subrius is aiming at being the power behind the throne. Hence all this putting up of his own candidate.'

I puzzled for hours on end over why Tiberius, who was sickened and horrified by death, who worried for days if he realized, as he very seldom did, that he had hurt someone, should accept all the projected murders so calmly, but I think he never really believed they were coming off. It was all too like the intense dream-life he led most of the time. He saw it in terms of poetry, a beautiful pattern of blood and bright steel and forgot what a corpse actually looks like, or that you have to kill a human being to get one. Anyway we were now into the height of summer, most people had left Rome and it was too hot to be bothered with moral distinctions. As far as Castor and I were concerned, we simply felt we might as well go down fighting; 'Death was twitching our ear' and it hardly seemed to matter what we did. Only with Marcus's death did I realize the risk to which Castor was exposed; now I lived half-

consciously always with the idea of his death. The circus people, superstitious to their finger-tips, felt that two deaths in quick succession demanded a third, and Castor, being nearer to Marcus and Pollux than anyone else, was marked down as the victim. But he survived. The horses knew their god.

Autumn came and deepened into winter. We realized with surprise that Castor had been racing for a year. Life had become very quiet and orderly: most of the spongers who had infested our house had gone, being friends of Pollux's or his valet. Quintus's friends came occasionally but went away finding he was never in. The only permanent guest who stayed with us was Silvius, a poet friend of Tiberius's, the same who had called me a horse-faced blue-stockinged. We had got into a set routine, Castor absorbed almost every day in training or exercising horses, only the festivals, and the odd dinner party with Piso or Subrius, whispered conversations taking place in corners to break the monotony. 'In fact,' remarked Castor one day, 'we have now become hopelessly bourgeois.'

'The bourgeoisie,' said Tiberius, 'don't usually rush together into bloodthirsty gangs for the purpose of cutting the throats of everyone they don't like.'

'We are bourgeois all the same. We're too hard-working and well-off to give life the interest of uncertainty, and not rich enough to join the great army of the rich and vulgar. If it weren't for all this plotting and, of course, the fact that I like working with horses, I'd be bored stiff.'

'Life's always uncertain. And most people take the line that we are a household composed entirely of lunatics. As for the conspiracy, surely it's not just an interesting little hobby? Myself, I'm beginning to feel rather bored with it. I wish they'd get a move on. Surely they must see that the imperial power must be overthrown, and quick.'

'We're aiming to overthrow the Emperor, not the im-

perial power. What are you hoping to do? I thought you, like us, supported Seneca as next emperor.'

'What I really want is a return to the Republic.'

'God Almighty, no. Look. Look, my dear Tiberius, be reasonable. You must see — anyone who's not a blind idealist, must see — that it's impossible at this stage to restore the Republic. And would we like it if we got it? It's not all like the Panegyrics on the Republic they do in the rhetoric schools. What about Clodius and Milo, and Sulla, and all the rest of them? There was plenty of brutality and tyranny then. More if anything than now. Besides none of the rest of us want a Republic.'

'Lateranus is a republican.'

'Lateranus is idealistic and disinterested, two things I mistrust in a conspirator. But practically everyone else is out to get something out of it for himself. Even you — surely it hasn't escaped your notice that if this comes off you'll get all your father's property back.'

'Good Lord, so I will. I hadn't thought of that.'

'God bless you, hadn't you really? What were you aiming to get out of this then?'

'I want a decent rational world instead of this drunken party that life seems to have become. I want order and sanity.'

The conspiracy snowballed up. The ones in already brought in their friends, and their friends brought in other friends. Our biggest coup was Faenius Rufus, Prefect of the Praetorian. He, like Piso, was the darling of the people, but I think he was at an advantage in having Tigellinus as co-prefect than whom no one could be a better foil for virtue. I felt uneasy at this number of conspirators, and still more uneasy at the fact that nobody seemed to contemplate murdering Nero in the near future. Quintus also was put off by this. Like so many others he had joined the conspiracy for revenge: his lover was dead, slaughtered

by order of some magistrate to satisfy the blood lust of the Roman people, and somebody was going to have to pay for it. Finding though that there was no immediate prospect of throat-slitting, he became extremely luke-warm. We hardly saw him from week's end to week's end anyway. He would come in at night, if he came home at all, long after the rest of us had gone to bed and go out in the morning as soon as dressed, often after we were up and out of the house.

Aquila came in looking rather worried one day. 'Look, when did anybody last see Quintus?'

'I haven't seen him for at least a week,' I said, 'Why?'

'Well, there are rather nasty rumours flying about, I wondered whether you knew anything about them.'

'Why, what are they saying?' said Tiberius. 'Mark you, I'd believe anything of Quintus.'

'Well, what I heard was that he'd taken to playing the zither and singing in a rather unsavoury pub down in the dock area. The Ganymede, I believe it's called.'

'Well, the name certainly suits Quintus,' said Tiberius. 'I don't see what business it is of mine though. If he chooses to turn tart, like his dear sister, who are we to stop him?'

'Has his sister . . . well, what you said?'

'Lord yes. I saw her the other day made-up about half an inch thick and hanging on the arm of some bloody wog. She saw me, but looked right through me.'

'If he wants to go to the dogs, let him,' said Castor. 'I don't care.'

'Poor thing, I think he was badly upset—' Tiberius broke off, bumbling and waving one hand in the air. 'I think this is his way of showing it. But I don't see it's my business to act the heavy father, especially as he's two years older than me. All the same it's worrying. Someone might easily bat him on the head and chuck his body in the river if only to sell his clothes, not to mention all that

awful cheap jewellery he wears. Or of course people are always getting killed in fights down there. There's plenty of opportunity of disposing of bodies and nobody any the wiser. Perhaps I ought to speak to him if only to find out if it's true.'

He did so. Quintus replied with the quotation from Aristophanes's *Birds*: 'It's very hard when you've made up your mind to throw your body to the crows, to find you can't,' and added that every word Aquila had said was true and so what? So he continued being out for days on end and bringing his disreputable friends home some nights. One night there was a knife-fight in the kitchen. We came and squinted through the crack of the door, decided that everything breakable had been broken, and went back to bed not wanting to be murdered. Quintus survived all right except for a black eye.

We went on going to see Paul fairly often, though I felt I couldn't look him in the eye, being mixed up in a conspiracy of which he would so obviously disapprove. Luke had just finished writing a life and sayings of Christ for some Gentile convert called Theophilus. We had never heard of him: it was I suppose rather shocking how few Christians we knew, even by sight, but although we believed devoutly in Christ, we found most of our fellow-Christians intellectually and socially and in every other way so unspeakable that we rather avoided their company except of course for Luke and Paul. Tiberius read Luke's treatise, criticized his style in parts, though mostly he approved of it, as being straightforward, uncomplicated by rhetorical tropes, and everything that modern literature was not. Finally he suggested that Luke should carry the story on after the death and resurrection, and produce another book dealing with the missionary work of the apostles. Luke put the idea to Theophilus who rather surprisingly welcomed it and produced a large advance payment. This was all to the good, as Theophilus was about

the richest of the Christians and was at that time largely footing Paul's bills.

Spring and summer came, and we continued plotting in an aimless sort of way. Subrius had the idea of killing the Emperor while he was performing on the stage, hoping that the audience would all rise in support of us. The plan was thought a good one, but no one cared actually to fix a day for it. There were as well jealousies among ourselves: our particular faction — Subrius's lot — were concerned not to do the actual killing under circumstances that would give Piso the chance to proclaim himself Emperor before we could manœuvre Seneca into that position, nor at all before we could be sure of Seneca's support, and Piso himself was jealous of Lucius Silanus, the last lineal descendant of Julius Caesar, who he was convinced would seize the Imperial power, given half a chance. So spring wore into a scorching summer, and we came at last to July the nineteenth, day of disaster, the day on which, as many people recalled after, the Gauls had sacked the city so many years ago.

CHAPTER XX

That night, Castor was at a stag-party for the eve of the wedding of one of his colleagues. I woke to hear him come stumbling in just before dawn. 'Darling, did the party go on this long? Good God, what on earth have you done to your clothes?' They were streaked with black, so was his face.

'The circus is on fire,' said Castor, sitting down on the edge of the bed. 'God knows what started it, but the whole thing's well ablaze now. Here, move over and let me get into bed, I want to get an hour or so's sleep before to-morrow.'

Next morning the fire was still blazing, and had spread before a strong south-east wind up the sides of the Palatine and the Aventine. Everybody assumed calmly that it would stop soon, fires were too common to worry about, but it did not stop. Our house lay directly in the path of the fire, near the Forum Boarium, and about dinner-time we judged it best to get our things together in case it reached us. We got together most of our stuff packed in a blanket and then went to bed, but there was little sleep. The red glow in the sky and the continuous crackle and roar, above all the fear, prevented that. After midnight a mob of people began to stream past the house. Castor, who had been prowling round half the night, got up and yelled to them to enquire where the fire had got to. He came back, saying, 'Get up, Fulvia, the fire's at the end of the street. See you've got everything; I'll wake the others.' I got up, got into my dress and shoes and started looking round to see what I had missed packing the night before. The furniture could not, of course, be taken, but there was a lot of

other stuff yet unpacked. I undid the blanket I had packed the things in and started hurling books, clothes, shoes, antimony-jars and whatever came to hand on top of the heap. Aquila and Tiberius came in and helped: it was all rather like a nightmare. To cap it Titus woke up and started to howl; 'Oh Lord no. Aquila, go and see if you can calm him down.' 'He says he wants his Brazier, what on earth does that mean?' 'It's his awful wooden doll with no legs or arms or face, I haven't the faintest idea where it is.' 'I packed it,' said Tiberius. 'Well, for God's sake unpack it again quick, or he'll go on howling like that for ever.'

Brazier was found and Titus pacified. 'I can't get Quintus awake,' said Tiberius. 'D'you mean to tell me that he's here?' 'He is, and blind drunk. I can't do anything with him.' In the end Aquila woke him by pouring a slop-pail over him. We knotted the corners of the blanket, and went out into the street with all our belongings, the house next door already afre.

The open air seemed to revive Quintus a bit. 'Did anybody think to bring my sketches?'

'Now why on earth should we?' said Tiberius.

'Oh well, I'd better go back and get 'em.'

'No,' you don't,' said Tiberius. 'You'll never get out again.'

'I'm perfectly sober now. You go on, I won't be a minute. I know exactly where they are.' He turned and ran back into the house. We followed the tail-end of the crowd as far as we could; at the end of the street, where another road ran across forming a T, there was a tight jam. We looked back at the house — smoke was now coming out of the upper windows, but Quintus still did not come. 'I wish we hadn't let him go,' said Tiberius, 'he was horribly drunk.' 'He'll be all right,' said Castor. 'Don't worry.' Then, as we watched, the façade of the house bent, as it were, at the knees, and crumbled slowly, slowly, with an increasing roar into the street.

'Christ have mercy,' said Castor. The flames were now licking up the sides of the next house.

We tried to shove forward as well as we could laden with bundles. Castor had the blanketful of stuff, and his money-bag and my jewel-case, I was clutching Titus, and Titus was clutching Brazier, Aquila was dragging his dogs on a long lead and had his toga folded up under his arm, Tiberius had a bag of books in one hand and a bundle of clothes in the other. The crowd surged backwards and forwards: we could see now that the entrance to our alley was blocked by a little man with a heavily pregnant woman in a wheelbarrow. Then in one last despairing heave the mob gained the main street, and there was no little man, only something that screamed, and that only for a short time. We found ourselves wedged behind a fat panic-stricken man in a green cloak. Tiberius white and gasping bent forward and was sick until he had nothing left in his stomach and then leant against the wall, rubbing his face against the rough plaster until it bled, as if by physical pain he could blot out the horror in his mind. I watched the vomit trickling down the man's cloak on the cobbles, but he was far too terrified to notice. Inch by inch we moved forward, up towards the Forum; one man came fighting against the current, crying: 'My wife, my wife,' but the crowd swept him back again. Behind me a woman started to scream, her shrieks rising and quickening; I trod on something soft, and nearly screamed too, but it was only a bundle of clothes that someone had dropped in their flight. Then Castor shifted the money-bag and jewel-case to his right hand and put his free arm round my shoulders, and I was calm again, and even Titus's howls were reduced to almost imperceptible crying.

In the Forum lay safety, if only we could reach it; no fire could sweep over that open tract of ground. The crowd fought, cursed, sweated, screamed, wept, and kicked its way gradually on to this sanctuary; their faces, twisted by

terror and reddened by the glow of the fire looked like those of demons. I thought how Quintus would have delighted in the scene, and then leant my head against Castor's shoulder and wept. Someone in the crowd was chanting a hymn to Isis; a voice ahead of us was lifted up in a long Hebrew chant: 'God is our refuge and our strength: a very present help in time of trouble,' and Tiberius joined in loudly and tunelessly. Behind us we heard one loud despairing shriek, and turned to see a five-storey house crash in ruin, on to the people packed below. And over all the loud menacing crackle of the fire, drowning the screams and prayers, coming always closer and closer.

Somehow we clawed our way into a narrow passage leading to the Forum. Castor had both arms round me, and Tiberius had wriggled one arm free and clasped it round my body, shielding me from the press behind. Aquila had disappeared completely. The walls seemed to lean together, and the smoke formed a solid ceiling above our heads; I felt shut in, blind, stifled, and started to sob shrilly, my self-control snapping like a frayed piece of harness. Then we stumbled into the Forum, bewildered by the sudden openness and freedom to move again.

Castor led me across to the nearest building, sat me down on the steps and started to calm me down; Titus, incredibly, had fallen asleep again, his face still wet with tears; Tiberius remained standing staring in front of him with blank horrified eyes. He was a fearful sight. His face was bloody where he had rubbed it against the wall; he had tried to wipe his eyes on the shoulder of his tunic, both hands being full, and had scratched his cheek on his cloak brooch. filthy, unshaven, tear-stained, one sandal gone, the sleeve of his tunic torn clean away, his long black hair plastered to his cheeks with blood and tears and soot. He brushed his hair out of his eyes, remarked mechanically, 'My God, I must get a haircut,' and then started trembling

violently, so his heels clacked on the pavement, and sat down beside me.

We were sitting there gradually recovering and wondering how many of our ribs were broken, when someone stuck his head round the corner of the building and said: 'Oy.' We looked round and saw Dionysus, dishevelled and carrying a large bundle done up in a cloak. 'Can I leave these with you? My place has gone too, and I don't want to lug 'em about everywhere. Be back here about dawn,' and he melted into the surrounding darkness. We opened the bundle; it contained two enormous elaborately wrought silver jugs. No need to ask where they came from; all Rome knew those jugs, glory of the Emperor's palace. Tiberius started to laugh shakily, 'Well, there's someone who's done well out of the fire, anyway.'

Castor frowned: 'Why can't Dio do his own dirty work? Hideously embarrassing position it puts us in to be lugging these things about.'

'Leave 'em here, then,' suggested Tiberius, 'and let someone else pinch them.'

'No, I can't do that, after all Dio's practically like a brother to me. Really he is a toad: some of us aren't yet thieves.'

After a pause Tiberius said, 'It's incredible. The real Panic terror and Dionysian rout and so on you read about in Greek literature.' If he was calm enough to draw literary parallels he must be all right. 'Look at it. Burning Ilium's nothing to it. I always wondered how Aeneas could have been so careless as to mislay Creüsa, but having seen this, my only wonder is that he didn't lose Anchises and Ascanius as well. By the same token, where's Aquila?'

'I haven't the faintest idea,' I said. 'He wasn't with us when we turned down into that alley.'

'Well, he'll be all right. I can't see Aquila doing anything so melodramatic as getting burnt to death.'

Silvius, the poet who had been sponging on us for so

long, appeared at this point. 'Don't tell me your house has gone. I left a whole lot of poems there too.'

'Don't worry,' said Tiberius, 'they weren't any of them particularly good.' As a comforting remark, and knowing Tiberius, I could tell it was genuinely meant as such, it did not succeed very well. Silvius puffed and blew indignantly and then changed the subject abruptly: 'I see your sister's been driven out of her house too.'

'Has she? Where is she?'

'Up by Castor and Pollux, with a mob of slaves and furniture and cooking-pots and what have you, sitting on the ground having hysterics. Don't worry, she's not hurt.' He moved off and we went to find Cornelia. We found her as described, sitting in fact on a lion-footed camp-stool shaking with sobs. 'Fulvia, my dear, don't tell me you're in this terrible situation, too? Have you lost much?'

'Only the furniture, which was pretty cheap and ugly.'

'Oh, my dear, don't talk to me about furniture. That glorious pair of ivory-ended couches, do you remember, they've gone. I'll never be able to replace them; pure, simple work, not like that terrible ornate stuff they make nowadays. Oh, Jupiter Stator!'

'Cornelia darling,' said Tiberius, sitting down beside her and taking her hand, 'I'm afraid there's been another tragedy. Quintus—'

'Oh, don't talk to me of that terrible boy. What's he done now?'

'Dearest he's dead. He insisted on going back into the house to get some drawings and the roof fell in on him.'

'No, how frightful. Tiberius you shouldn't have let him. Oh, my lord, and the red marble table has been left behind too.' There was obviously no getting any sense out of her, so we turned to the butler. 'Do you know where Lady Cornelia intends to go?' said Tiberius.

'I believe, sir, that as soon as it is light we shall be

moving round to Mr Marcus Cornelius's. I understand, sir, that his house has escaped the disaster.'

'Right. Well, if you aren't here when we come back, we'll go there. Meanwhile may we leave our things under your charge? And Lady Fulvia would like to leave the child.' We deposited Titus with the nanny and walked off.

'Where now?' said Castor.

'God knows. Let's go and find some low dive and shoot crap. Or do you want to sleep, Fulvia?'

'Me? I couldn't.'

We sat down again on some temple steps and stared at all the people, sitting on the ground among their possessions weeping, wandering up and down looking for people they had lost, huddled in blankets trying to sleep, or calmly cooking a meal as if in their own kitchens, filthy, half-clad or barefoot, bound up with make-shift bandages.

'What has only just occurred to me,' said Castor, 'is what happens to me in the matter of racing now the Circus is burnt? Fortunately I've got something' – he touched the money-bag and my jewels, which, like Dio's jugs, we had not left with Cornelia – 'but even so. Of course, it was tremendously uncertain anyhow. Setting aside the possibility of death, I might easily have broken a leg or something and disabled myself. Besides, one can't race after a certain age. Another ten years and I'm finished. Middle-age is creeping in on me like all of us. Maybe it's our youth going up in those flames.'

'What, at twenty-two?' said Tiberius. 'Anyway, I'm never going to be middle-aged. I'm going out with a bang when I'm twenty-nine.'

'Sez you,' I answered. 'You'll probably live till you're ninety, boring all your great-grandchildren to death with how you struck the first blow against – well, you know who.'

'I'm not going to have any great-grandchildren, because I'm not going to marry.' A man with a long blistering burn

down his left forearm and staring dead eyes stopped in front of us. 'Have any of you seen my brother?' We shook our heads, and he moved on to the next group repeating his question monotonously, hopelessly. We watched him as he moved blindly on and was finally hidden behind a building.

'Well, where was I?' said Tiberius. '(Poor boy, I wonder if he'll find his brother.) No, I don't feel myself capable of the responsibilities of marriage. I don't feel any poet can support a wife, or only very few of them. Persius could.'

'Persius had private means,' said Castor.

'I don't mean financially, idiot, I mean spiritually. Look how calm Fulvia is because she knows she can depend on you. I could never make any woman feel as secure as that. And I wouldn't want a mistress, 'cause then I'd feel I was dependent on her, and I wouldn't like that at all. I've never had a woman in my life and probably I'll die that way. That'll be about my only asset when I come to the Last Judgment.'

'After a presumptuous remark like that,' said a voice above us, 'the Gods will probably punish you by making you fall madly in love with an actress twice your age and end up by marrying her.' We looked up and there was Aquila, surprisingly clean beside the people round us, and dressed in a toga only slightly crumpled and flecked with soot. The contrast was too much for us and we went off into shrieks of somewhat hysterical laughter, though actually I think we would have been far more surprised if Aquila had been as filthy and untidy as everyone else. 'Look, we can't stay here,' he went on, 'let's move off that way, away from it all.' We plunged into a tangle of side streets, the noise and crowds getting less and less, but the smoke-ceiling still hanging over us, blotting out the stars. Going up one alley, a tart came mincing up to us and said: 'Good evening, dearie.' We were pushing past, pretending not to notice, when she said, 'Name of Isis, it's Tib.' There.

smothered in make-up, with the cheap shrill accent of a street-walker, was Quintus's sister, shorn of any trace of aristocratic descent. 'Fancy that. You lost your home too? I'm doing well out of it. Business is good, people want to forget their troubles.'

'Lord, here's another to break the news to,' said Tiberius under his breath.

'What news, dearie?

'Your brother's dead.'

'No! What, in this? How did it happen?'

'We got out of our house just in time, then he insisted on going back to get some of his drawings, and the whole thing caved in on him.'

'Poor thing.' As far as one could see anything under her make-up, her face was very serious. 'Always fussing over those drawings. And when you think how ugly they were. Well, I must be going. Business as usual even if you are in mourning. 'Bye-bye.'

We wandered aimlessly on through the dark streets and the next people we met were Tryphaena and Aristobulus, shepherding a party of terrified women and children along. 'Tiberius, Christ be praised that we've met you. Could you and Furia and Lucius get these people up to Paul's? They'll be safe there. We must go back and see who else we can help.' So we were left with a party of about a dozen people, women, small children, babies, one or two, the very old, to somehow help, encourage, even carry up the mile or so to the Flavian, Aquila coming too, and doing more than any of us. Arrived at Paul's house, Tiberius led the party in and promptly got into an argument with the decurion in command of the guard. 'What's the matter?' yelled Castor. 'He says he won't let any more people in, the house is crowded out as it is.'

'Oh, he won't, won't he? I'll see about that' and he marched into the little room that served as a guardroom and launched into the attack at once. 'So this is the way

you keep watch, is it? Drinking on duty.' He picked up the wine skin and flung it out of the window. 'Your centurion'll have something to say about that. One man apparently insensible. My God, if you were under my command—' etc etc, for about five minutes. 'Dice too, I see.' He picked them up and rolled them a few times. 'Private Hyacinthus, these are yours, I believe?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I thought so, no one loads their dice as clumsily as you do.'

Another man jumped up swearing but Castor, without even looking at him, drove his elbow into the man's chest and knocked him back into his chair. 'You'd better set about sobering that man up if he's not too far gone for that to be possible. Decurion, who commands your century?' The decurion told him: 'Ah yes, I knew him. And what's your name? Yes, well, I think I'd better mention this to him. I don't know if this is the way you usually keep watch, but I'm sorry for Paul if so.' At this point Luke appeared in the doorway. 'Decurion what is all this noise about? The master's getting the first sleep he's had for about two days, and you have to wake him.' Paul himself pushed past him at this: 'I would like to remind you that there are some badly injured people in this house, and in any case this is no moment for having a party. I think I've had to speak to you lot before about turning this place into a kind of bar. Besides, doesn't it occur to you that these are just the sort of circumstances under which I might try and escape?'

'Oh, we knew you wouldn't,' said Hyacinthus with an angelic smile. Both his front teeth were missing which gave him an unusually naïve and childish expression. This answer only infuriated Paul even more: 'And what does it matter what you knew? Your business is to guard me, not to drink yourself silly. Now come and help me get beds for these people. Luke, you look after the ones that are

hurt, and Fulvia, could you help him? There are some old sheets on the clothes-chest in my bedroom you can tear up for bandages.'

The rest of the night was spent in hard work, preparing bandages, helping dress wounds under Luke's instructions, holding a screaming child still while its burns were seen to. It was horrifying work, but at least it was a comfort to be doing something useful instead of running round and round wringing my hands like most of the people in the Forum. By the time the last person had been dealt with, I only wanted to drop on to the floor and sleep, but Paul appeared with some old tunics. 'Fulvia, could you tear these up for swaddling clothes? Utterly feckless, these women, they don't seem to have saved a thing, or they've only brought all their gewgaws, not a thought for the child.' So I turned to and tore those tunics into strips, until I thought I would fall asleep over them. It was dawn by now, and Paul sent Castor out to buy corn and Castor took the opportunity to return Dio his jugs. (We had been terrified that Paul or Luke would open the bundle and see that they were Nero's.) He returned with a large sackful, announcing 'Corn's down to half-price. Emperor's orders. The Forum's still safe, but it won't be for long if the fire doesn't stop soon, and the place is well ablaze now.' Eight hours ago, I thought, I was in bed in my own house. Can it really have been such a short while ago? And where is this going to end? If only I could sleep. But there was still work to be done. About thirty people were in the house, sleeping two and three in a bed, sleeping on a couple of blankets and a pile of straw. There were babies to be washed and put into clean clothes whose mothers were too badly hurt to deal with them; there were a number of children who had mislaid their families, then there was food to be prepared, and served to the people in relays, plates to be washed and dried after each lot of people had been fed before the next could be served. It was noon

before I could finally go upstairs, find an empty bed and roll into it and sleep.

I was woken about seven hours later by Castor. 'Sweet, I'm sorry to wake you but they need help with the cooking.'

'It's all right, I'm quite rested now. Have you slept?'

'Yes, I went to bed before you did. Paul's the one who's really had a time of it; Luke tells me that he's only had about two hours' sleep since the fire started, and I woke him out of that jawing that dam' Quaternion. However, we've finally persuaded him to go to bed now.'

Down in the kitchen it was scorching. 'Reckon we're no better off than all them poor blokes burnin' to death down there,' said one woman. Outside in the courtyard Tiberius was presiding over a table of about ten children, mostly Jewish, who evidently regarded him as an oracle and bombarded him with questions. 'Mister, what's this stuff? Mister, you've given him more'n you've given me. Mister, what's your ring made of? Mister, where's my Dad?'

'He'll be down in the city,' said Tiberius, 'helping rescue people, as every decent man should be doing now.'

'Mister, why aren't you?'

'Maybe because I'm not as brave as your father.'

'Mister, where's David? My little brother you know.'

'I expect some other kind person's taking care of him, like Paul is you.'

'Mister, will my mum be all right? Mr Luke's lookin' after her.'

'If Luke's looking after her of course she'll be all right. Luke's a very clever doctor, you know.'

'Mister,' wailed a black-haired little four-year-old, 'where's my father? I'm Rachel, Eliphias the tanner's daughter, you know. And where's Mum and Siméon and Judith—' dissolving into tears.

'Heavens, I can't answer all these questions at once. I'm not Proteus you know.'

'Who's Proteus, mister?' bawled two children at once.

'Proteus,' began Tiberius, looking anxiously at Rachel, 'was an old, old man who lived on an island outside Alexandria. He had green hair, and green whiskers. And there were barnacles growing on the end of his toes.' Rachel started to giggle and Tiberius smiled in relief.

Half an hour later he was sitting crosslegged on the dining-room floor surrounded by a semicircle of children, most of them, to my great amusement, addressing him as Rabbi, relating in the most perfect Greek prose, gilded with Aramaic phrases, with quotations from the psalms and extempore translations from Virgil, stories from Homer, from Sophocles, from the Scriptures, both he and his audience spellbound, dead relations and burnt homes utterly forgotten. Later when the children were in bed he said to me, 'Obviously I have mistaken my métier. I shall become a professional story-teller; hire a room and get all the mothers to pay me vast sums for keeping their brats quiet.' A pause; then, 'You know, I think people should use prose far more. The fault of this age is that everything has to be in verse, and dam' bad verse at that. Whereas prose could be a good vehicle for a lot of things. Satire, for instance, like this thing of Petronius's.'

'What thing?'

'Oh, I don't know how you'd describe it. I've only seen bits of it anyway. I ran into him at a party of Luca's, and he told me about it and sent round some of it for me to read next day. I meant to show you it. He described it as a sort of modern Odyssey - rogue's Odyssey understood - no sort of plot, just two or three people wandering around Rome and the provinces, and their adventures, mostly pretty disreputable. Oh yes, and there was a most glorious take-off of Lucan's style, which delighted me.'

We heard a sudden burst of laughter out in the hall and went out to find Castor and Aquila there. 'Aquila says that

Ascytlos's house is burning,' said Castor. 'He's away in Baiae and I gather all Rome has turned out to loot. It sounds the most glorious circus. Let's go and watch, if you've finished here.' We went off out the front door. 'Tiberius, you coming? What's the matter?'

'Thinking of Quintus, poor boy.'

'What? Oh, I see. Never mind, that pub he frescoed is the other side of the river, so that'll be okay.' We plunged down again into the Gehenna below; it was dark now and the sky glowed copper-red above us. Outside Ascytlos's house was a most glorious shambles. Ragged loafers with gold dinner-services done up in lengths of silk; a couple of tarts fighting desperately over their spoil; some methodical people who had brought handcarts cording piles of furniture and plate on to them; all the slaves, and most other people, roaring drunk and making no effort to stop the looting, and wine running down the gutters.

The first person we saw was Dionysus. He came staggering up carrying an enormous and incredibly hideous statue of Hercules killing the Hydra. 'Here we are again, I thought Christians didn't loot.'

'Well, by all means search me to see if I've got a twenty-four piece dinner-service concealed about me. What did you do with those other things?'

'Which? Oh, those. Oh, one of the blokes I work with has got a place across the river and we've dumped 'em there.' A fair curly-headed Jewish boy of about sixteen came up carrying a couple of wine skins. 'What have you got there, pet?'

'Falernian, it says.'

'I don't believe it. The old bugger never had a drop worth drinking in his cellars. Give it here.' He tasted it. 'Father Zeus, it is so. Good vintage too.' He tasted it again. 'Ninety-five, I should say at a guess. What do you say?' He handed it over to Castor, who tasted it too. 'No, I really couldn't say. I'm no judge of wine.'

'Did the old b—— give you stuff like that when you dined there?'

'More like cow-piss it was.'

'I bet. Have you heard the Emperor's back in Rome?'

'No! when did he arrive?'

'Oh, this morning sometime. Moment he heard his blooming great palace was on fire, back he comes to see if he can't salvage some of his stuff.'

'I imagine most of his stuff has been salvaged already by various kind people.'

'Oh, the place was stripped bare by the time he got there. Look, we'd better move off or else we'll get caught. I think somebody'll have to help me with this statue.'

'Leave it here,' said Tiberius. 'It would be a crime not to let a thing like that be destroyed.'

'Oh, I shall melt it down anyway. Have a drink.' He had been sucking away at the wine skin as he talked; Tiberius had a drink and I had a drink and the Jew boy had several drinks, then we had another round and it was not until a wall fell in near where we were standing that we fled, he one way and we the other, abandoning Hercules and the Hydra to well-deserved destruction.

We skirted round the burning pile, trying to make out the extent of the fire. The Forum was inaccessible; no doubt Cornelia's household, with Titus, had fled to Uncle Marcus's but it was too late to go and see them. We finally fetched up in the Campus Martius, which was full of refugees. We found Gaius, of all people, with a pile of about twenty silver-gilt plates, bargaining with a hard-faced Greek.

'Hullo, how extraordinary meeting you,' yelled Tiberius.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' Then to the man, 'Well, what'll you give me? Can't take 'em home, my aunt'd have a fit.'

'Seven-fifty.'

'Don't be funny. Two thousand, take it or leave it. You're not the only fence in Rome. And that's cheap.' The man

handed over the coins, seized the plates and made off.
'Of course I could have screwed about twice as much out of him, but I want to get back and get some more stuff.'

'You've been having a time of it, haven't you? Did you loot that armlet, too?'

'No, it was given me by a man I know.'

'What for?'

'Just out of the kindness of my heart.'

'I bet. Bloody little catamite.'

'Nice names to be putting on your orphan brother.'

'Oh, poor ickle kiddy. Has Uncle Quintus's place gone too?'

'Yes, we're at Uncle Marcus's bloody great barrack. I must be off.'

'Mercenary little brute,' said Tiberius gazing after him. 'I can't think where he gets it from. Of course it's a horrid thing to say about one's brother, but I do remember Fa had a Jewish valet about nine months before Gaius was born. And Golly, what an accent.'

We wandered through the Campus Martius, filled with waiting people recounting disaster, and suddenly found ourselves face to face with Subrius. He seized Castor by both elbows, and said, 'You've heard he's back in Rome?'

'Of course.'

'Right. What's more he's going about without a single guard.'

'Oh-oh. That's something I didn't know.'

'Well then.' He drew us back behind the wall of a building. 'So it seems to me, it would be an ideal opportunity. No one takes the blame, still more important, there aren't a crowd of ne'er-do-wells to take the credit. Faenius Rufus behind us, the guard can strike, and then—'

'Have you got Seneca lined up?' said Tiberius.

'Not exactly but we can't miss this opportunity. You heard this other rumour that's been flying about?'

'What?'

'That he's been standing at the top of that tower on the Esquiline playing the lyre, and chanting bits of his oratorio on the burning of Troy.'

'No!' said Tiberius. 'God of Abraham it's not true. "The crashing crackling flame eats hungrily the burning houses, As doth the flame of love devour greedily a man's vitals."

'That's not it,' I said.

'Yes. It goes on for about three hours, all exactly like that. Oh this is the funniest thing I've heard in years.'

'Pretty awful thing to do,' said Aquila.

'Oh no. I can quite see how one could wish to chant something. If one had no heart, and I hardly think he can have, it would be the most wonderful sight. But to chant muck like that—' he leant against the wall, helpless with laughter.

'Is it true, do you think?' asked Aquila of Subrius.

'Does it matter? Properly publicised it could be of tremendous value to us.'

'We've got enough on our side without spoiling our case with lies,' said Tiberius.

'Do you think it's a lie?'

'Frankly no; it sounds perfectly in character. But you'd spread it just the same if it were, wouldn't you?'

Subrius turned from him to Castor in despair.

'Now look, we don't know where he may be—but it'll probably be somewhere on the edge of the fire. You draw the Suburra and I'll go up towards the Esquiline.' So we returned to the edges of the fire, first together, then Subrius branched off slightly to the north. We went down one narrow street after another.

'He won't be here,' said Castor gloomily, 'he's much more likely to be up on the Esquiline.'

'That's why Subrius sent us here,' said Tiberius, 'he doesn't trust us to do the job properly.'

A group of men came running down the street waving torches, and the first of them hurled his into a house near

us. 'Here, what the hell do you think you're doing?' said Tiberius.

'What does it look like, eh?' said one of them swiping with his torch at Tiberius's head. Tiberius ducked amid a smell of burning hair.

'What's happened to the watch that they're letting you do this?'

'Orders is orders,' remarked another man mysteriously. 'Whose orders?'

'Oh, come away,' said Castor. 'There's only one person who gives orders in this world. And we've got to find him, though God knows how. Oh Lord, now my shoe's coming to bits.' He leant against the wall trying to tie it on firmly. Tiberius walked forward a bit, stopped, staring up the street and fingering his dagger, then startled us all by a loud yelp. Across the end of the street dashed a small figure, cloak billowing out behind, thick neck and coarse-featured face turned by the firelight to copper as bright as a new-minted denarius. Tiberius panicked, bolted back towards us, and was stopped by Aquila who bawled, 'Idiot, give me your dagger.' Then we realized that the figure was gone, and hared up the street again. When we reached the end he was nowhere in sight. 'He went down that way,' said Castor and we ran desperately on again, I feeling more and more frightened and more and more out of breath, until Tiberius finally pulled up, saying, 'No good we've lost him again. Probably swept up to Heaven like Romulus. Or of course the other place.' He sat down on the ground and panted. 'God Almighty, how did I come to miss such a chance? Oh well, there won't be another chance, let's go home.'

'What home?' said Castor. 'We have no home.'

'Oh, you know what I mean. Come on.'

So back to Paul's we went, to find a weary-eyed Luke. 'Had to cope with a baby being born.'

'Oh, where is it?' I said. 'Can I see it?'

'It's dead. And the mother. It was a seven-months' child; the excitement and commotion and everything brought it on, I suppose.'

'Well, is there anything we can do, or can we go to bed?'

'Go to bed, do. And sleep late if you want. We've got plenty enough people unhurt to cope, it's time somebody else in this house did some work besides you.' We crept miserably to bed, Tiberius nearly in tears.

Days seemed to run into one another as the fire continued. One hardly noticed light and darkness, only fire and smoke, and those there were always. We slept when we were too weary to keep awake, and ate when there happened to be food ready, and in between I spent hours standing in the kitchen which, unbelievably, was hotter than the summer heat and flames outside, in my petticoat with the skirts hitched up to the knee - I soon abandoned decency for comfort - cooking or washing baby-clothes, which had to be dried in the kitchen, and still were blackened by the thick smoke which penetrated even there. It was impossible to remember coolness, or a clear sky, or to imagine any life not lived against a background of flames. 'Do you suppose it will ever stop?' said Tiberius one night, leaning out of the window looking down on the city. 'Maybe it'll go on and on until it engulfs the whole world. Maybe this is the end of the world.'

'Rome's a world in itself,' I said.

'Rome's a hundred worlds, and half of them don't know the other half exist. There are people who never see anything but the Forum and the Senate and a few big houses and people who know nothing but the brothels of the Suburra or those awful pseudo-intellectual dives scattered all round the place. There are those who live in and out of artisans' shops and the synagogue, and equally those who hardly set foot outside the Circus Maximus. And us - where do we belong? Me in particular - I don't know who

I am.' He turned round and faced me. 'Look at all of us. Last four males of the house of Cornelius, and half of us dead. Quintus – poor aristocrat by birth, artist by vocation, near-prostitute by way of life and consciously and deliberately living among and like the down-and-outs. Marcus – son of one of the Emperor's very few upper-class friends, stinking rich, chariot-driving like some low provincial purely for the fun of it, complete bone-head, no morals, though some code of honour and unlike the rest of us, aristocrat to the backbone. My brother – mean, vulgar, mercenary-minded, no values at all except money ones, sharp as any Jew and just as unscrupulous about getting rich. Also – let's face it – a catamite – again just for the money. And myself – what can I say about myself? Governing classes by birth, poet by vocation, sponger by force of circumstances, heretic Jew by conviction and God knows what by way of life. So here we are – one of the oldest families in Rome in danger of extinction. Maybe it's just as well.' He turned back to the window. 'Rome's gone for ever. This is only burning the corpse. It'll be rebuilt sure enough, even if it's flat with the ground, but he'll rebuild it and it won't be Rome but Alexandria.'

But life went on. We did the work at Paul's – it was getting easier now, more systematized – and then we plunged down back to that furnace that we found so impossible to keep away from. Still there was looting. Still always fresh tales of disaster, most people, like ourselves, walking up and down the streets because they had no home to go to or could not stay in it. We went sometimes to Uncle Marcus's, but there was very seldom anyone there except Cornelia and the children and a very few slaves. Titus we left there, feeling there were too many children already at Paul's. Otherwise we roamed round the streets clasping our daggers and never finding another occasion to use them. A good many people were dissipating their loot in parties; we drifted into one of these, given in an

abandoned mansion, and finding no one challenged us, or indeed took any notice of us at all, we stayed there drinking. It had, I knew, only been abandoned a few hours before, but already it looked like a brothel, wine-stains on the marble paving, filthy drawings and remarks scribbled on the delicate frescoes. I fell over a couple asleep on the floor in whom I saw a momentary but horrifying likeness to Quintus and Pollux. Tiberius wandered up and said with utter bewilderment, 'He bit me in the neck.'

'Who?'

'Just a man.'

'But why? Anger or amorousness or what?'

'I don't know. He just came up and bit the back of my neck. Let's get out of here. I think everybody at this party's mad.'

It was several days from the start of the fire before anybody thought to make any serious attempt to stop it. Finally the demolition of a large block at the foot of the Esquiline, in the path of the fire but still some way from it, was organized. Castor and Tiberius helped with this; I watched them for a bit, puffs of brick dust like fiery smoke flying from each blow of the pickaxe and then went back to cooking and washing-up feeling this attempt also was doomed to failure. It was on the afternoon of the sixth day that Tiberius staggered into the house, shouting: 'We've done it! I tell you it's stopped, we're home' Then his legs seized up on him, and he sat down on the floor, wept for about five minutes from sheer relief and exhaustion, and then suddenly fell asleep, and slept for fourteen hours. I slept too, we all slept, dreaming of smoke and flames, and awoke to find the dream still going on, the city still ablaze. It took some time to realize that this was no dream but true; that the fire had broken out again, this time in Tigellinus's gardens, well away from the course of the previous fire.

It took three days to extinguish this new fire but I have

no memory of those days. No doubt I cooked and ate and even slept, but I cannot remember it, or maybe my memories run together with those of the first outbreak of fire. The only thing I remember clearly is Castor coming upon me as I sat asleep with my head on the kitchen table, saying: 'It's all over now, darling,' and then carrying me upstairs and putting me into a proper bed, where it was very soft and I could sleep quietly and there was no more fire, not even in my dreams.

CHAPTER XXI

Three-quarters of the city and most of its inhabitants' lives lay in ruins, but fortunately we did not know the full extent of the damage yet. Over the next fortnight, though, it was gradually born in on me that it is not difficult to survive a disaster; what really breaks the spirit is picking up the pieces of one's broken life afterwards.

I woke late the morning after the fire ceased, thankful no longer to have my lungs full of smoke, and bewildered by a strange noise which it took me some time to identify as the silence left by the ending of those noisy flames. Down in the kitchen I found Tiberius standing over the stove, already preparing lunch, Rachel bat Eliphas, as usual, hanging on to his skirts. 'Sit you down, my dear, and don't do a stroke of work, you need a rest. And after lunch we'll go into conclave and try and decide what to do next. We can't stay here indefinitely.'

Most other people were now beginning to be troubled by the same consideration, but we were more fortunate than most in having managed to save something. Most of our money was gone, buying food for the other refugees, but there still remained my jewels, which were worth a fair amount. Money had been flowing into the house regularly for the last eighteen months; we were too footloose to put it into furniture, too bohemian to invest in a large house with several slaves, so even after good food and wine, books and clothes had been bought in large quantities there was plenty left over, and jewellery was the obvious thing. Quite apart from what Castor had bought me, there were presents from all the others, including some fantastic but beautiful pieces from Quintus, presents too

from fellow-drivers of Castor's and New Year gifts from the head of the faction stables. Gold hairpins with bees as heads, ear-rings of all kinds, square-cut British jet, flawed emeralds and amethysts, black-veined turquoise, pendants of quartz and amber, heavy, elaborately wrought copper and silver bracelets, a string of pearls, small and badly shaped, but still pearls, most valuable and most beloved of all, a present from a friend of Castor's who had been campaigning in Britain, a bracelet of pure, soft British gold, dintered all over with Titus's toothmarks, heavy and bendable like lead, so that it could be twisted round the throat or into the hair. There were ivory rouge and antimony pots, carved with the heads of gods, there was a silver-backed mirror, chased with a picture of Venus rising from the waves, there were scores of rings, semi-precious stones, wrought metal, even a number of amulet-rings worn for their beauty, not for any belief in them. The Christians disapproved of this; only Paul to my surprise supported me. 'It's just as superstitious and idolatrous to believe that these things do harm as to believe that they do good. Only you would be well advised to adorn yourself with chastity and obedience rather than with these idiot creations of brass and stone.' The others had not much: Aquila two or three rings, Tiberius the family ring, which could not be sold, and a few cheap cloak brooches, Castor quite a lot, but mostly stuff he wore racing, which had to be on show all the time, heavy silver armlets and collars studded with emeralds, blazing emerald rings, gold-hilted daggers and so on, mostly presents from admiring females.

An afternoon's intensive searching found us one room in Porta Capena, that region of the city that lay south-east of the circus and had thus escaped the fire. It was rather small, unspeakably filthy, lumps of plaster off the walls, daylight showing through the roof, I hardly dared scrub the floor for fear that it would splinter into nothing if I

did, but ~~at~~ least it was our own. There were only two beds, but Tiberius and Aquila could share, and Titus still just fitted into the cradle. I rigged up a curtain across the side of our bed dividing the room into two, and we slept that night in our own home again, far better off than most of the other inhabitants of the city. Racing continued too in the Circus Flaminia which lay the other side of the river, so we were, in fact, very well off for fire survivors.

Stories of death and disaster piled up, recounted by everyone we met: 'Oh, poor old so-and-so, he's had it, house fell in on him . . . *Him?* I never knew what happened to him. He got separated from us somehow, and nothing was ever heard of him again . . . Well, you know she was four months pregnant? So it all brought on a miscarriage and that finished her off . . . Oh, didn't you hear what happened to him? One of his creditors took the opportunity to *knif~~e~~ him* in the confusion. His body was carried along upright for about a quarter of a mile, with his arms still wrapped round the bundle he was carrying, the crush was so awful—' The stories came flooding in. Many people remained at Paul's including a number of orphans. There was a project that we should adopt Rachel bat Eliphas, but finally Aquila and Priscilla, whose house had survived, took her on. 'Probably better,' said Castor, 'I don't suppose we should give her a frightfully Christian upbringing and we're certainly overcrowded.'

The Emperor worked nobly, building temporary shelters, throwing open his gardens to the homeless, diverting all the ships that could be spared to importing grain at half price, clearing acres of rubble, organizing, rebuilding. All this availed him nothing. The population of Rome chose to believe that he deliberately fired the city, and nothing he did ~~was~~ was right in their eyes. This rumour was substantiated by the fact that Nero marked out a large tract of the ruins between the Palatine and the Esquiline as the site for his colossal Golden House. 'So now half Rome is

not merely to be ruled but actually inhabited by the Emperor,' said Tiberius. 'You heard the thing Silvius wrote:

*The Palace is spreading and swallowing Rome!
Let us all flee to Veii and make it our home.
Yet the Palace is growing so damnably fast
That is threatens to gobble up Veii at last!*

so obviously it becomes apparent that he fired the city so as to build some vulgar great palace on the ruins of Vesta's temple. Very symbolic.'

'Do you really think he did it?' said Castor.

'Of course not. He has no conscience, of course, and I think he is a bit loony — mark you, he has the temperament of an artist without a streak of artistic ability — but he's not literally insane, and no one who wasn't could possibly have done a thing like that.'

'I'm not certain. I don't think I'd put anything past him. I don't think it's entirely his fault; it's the fault of a governmental system which can put unlimited power into the hands of a very young man. But he has no sense of responsibility and he's perfectly capable of firing the city — though I don't say he did — if only for the hell of the thing.'

The Emperor, seeing that these rumours were flying about, looked round for a scapegoat and proceeded to fix on the Christians. It was a good choice; nobody liked the Christians: they were popularly supposed to hate all men, and desire nothing more than the extinction of the human race, all sorts of other slanders were current about them, moreover people had now got round to distinguishing them from Jews, so they did not have the immunity to religious persecution that the Jews enjoyed. Tiberius first brought the news of this accusation to us, collapsing helpless with laughter on to his bed. 'He really must be loony if he thinks people can believe a thing like that.'

'It's no laughing matter,' said Castor. 'You idiot, don't you see that if he says we're guilty, we *are* guilty. I wish

I could get Fulvia and Titus right away from Rome till all this has blown over. Anyway, I think we'd better not go to meeting for a bit. What do you think?'

'Well, actually,' said Tiberius, considerably embarrassed, 'I think I will go.'

'Why?'

'Well, I don't know. I don't like the Emperor's orders making any difference to me and I don't suppose anything'll happen to me. Anyway, we're all living under the shadow of death.'

This was true. The inevitable had followed on the heels of the fire. Dirt, overcrowding, destroyed sewers, disrupted water supplies – plague; in the crowded camps in the parks and gardens the epidemic raged violently and killed more people even than the fire. 'So terrible,' Cornelia said to me, 'but in a way one feels it may be best. Most of these people have so little left to live for. Thank the Gods we're off to the country next week. Why don't you and Titus come with us?' But before that week came her son had sickened and died all within twenty-four hours. She left for the country though in the end, taking Titus with her. I stayed with an irrational feeling that if I left the boys something terrible might happen to them. Tiberius, in particular, I worried about: it seemed that only the death of the Emperor could stop this anti-Christian mania, and this the conspirators did not seem inclined to pull off yet. 'They come,' said Tiberius, 'and they talk, and drink our wine, and elaborate their little plots and sub-plots like a third-rate poet polishing his verses and they *do* absolutely bugger-all.'

This was a Sunday morning, and he was waiting to set off to meeting until I had mended his only decent tunic, 'I wish you weren't going,' I said. 'It absolutely terrifies me. Why must you?'

'I don't really know. Partly out of defiance to the Emperor. Partly because I can't believe anything can really

happen to me. Mark you, I'd never dare do this if I weren't a citizen; the things they do to non-citizens—'

'Don't tell me, for God's sake.'

'I won't. I don't like to think of them myself. Mostly though, I think it's a feeling that the day of my death is fixed and I'd rather go out this way than break my neck falling into a sewer or something.'

*Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span . . .
Never to be born is best, ancient writers say,
Never to have breathed the breath of life, never to
have looked
Into the eye of day;
The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn
away.*

But I'd never do it at all if I were in your position; having no wife or children or anything I feel I can afford to gamble with life.'

'Well, I don't like it. Here's your tunic. I feel one of these days we'll find ourselves having to fetch your body in from the execution ground.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake don't if I am taken. I don't want you to be taken too. Why on earth should it matter to me what happens to my body? I'm going now; I shan't be back till after dinner, I'm spending the day at Paul's. 'Bye.'

'Bye.' I departed also, feeling rather conscience-stricken, to watch Castor racing and spent the whole afternoon at the Circus.

At dinner-time Tryphaena appeared. 'Have you heard?' 'Heard what?'

'They've got Tiberius.'

'What's happened? When's he being tried?'

'He has been tried. It's all over.'

'Tell me,' I said. 'How did it all happen?' I was very cold all over; after that first blow — 'They've got Tiberius' — nothing could ever hurt me again. Very faintly her voice

reached me across a room apparently the size of the Mediterranean.

'It was after the meeting at Aristobulus's. Most people had left, but Tiberius was still there, and they walked in and took everyone there, Aristobulus too. I saw someone afterwards who was at the trial. He said they just hauled up Tiberius and said : "You a Christian?" so he said "Yes." And they said, "Will you sacrifice to the Emperor?" So he said, "No," and the Judge said, "Take him away." Then he said, "I'm a Roman citizen, you've no right to bind me," and the judge asked his name and said : "Son of the senator of that name? I remember; accused of treason about three years ago. I'm sorry to see a person of your standing mixed up with this gang of incendiaries. I'll see you get a clean death." And so they beheaded him.'

'Has anyone fetched his body in?' asked Castor.

'I don't think so. Does it matter?' She got up and went.

'I suppose we ought to get the body in,' said Castor.

'He said not. He said he didn't mind what happened to his body, and he didn't want us to get involved in anything.'

'Well, if he said that, he meant it. It wouldn't be just showing off. Being him, I don't think he would mind what happened to the body anyway. He was so much interested only in the mind and abstractions and so on, not living really in this world, one wonders if he notices now that he isn't in it. He didn't really belong. Like a bit of air in a tumbler pushed upside down into a basin of water. Release it, and the air flies to the surface, unmarked by the water. Me, I'm more like a bit of rag in water, I can't imagine life without the body or not in the world.'

'So what are we to do about his body? I feel we ought to get it. But I'm frightened.'

'Oh, leave it. He didn't want you to get it. Poor darling, you loved him more than any of us, didn't you?'

'Yes, I suppose so. Not the way I love you, of course.'

'Sweetie, do you think I'm jealous? Now leave the washing-up and go straight to bed.'

'I couldn't sleep.'

'You probably will. I'll come too. Come on.'

But I could not sleep. Castor slept quite soon and I got out of bed and sat on the window-sill trying to realize what this death entailed, muttering to myself in Latin and in Greek and in odd snatches of Aramaic. In the corner Aquila slept alone in the other large bed; once he flung out an arm and woke with the shock of finding no one there, and then fell asleep again. I sat there, trying to decide why I was not going to fetch his body in. In the end I decided, it was fear: not fear of being taken myself or fear of what might happen to Titus if I was taken, just utter terror of seeing that body without life. The hands especially: I wondered if death would have robbed them of all their beauty. I knew those hands better than I did my own: long thin fingers, broad palms, the bones showing delicately across the back of the hand. A society woman would have envied those hands, and would have let them lie idle for fear of spoiling them; Tiberius used them heedlessly, and they were marked with the brands of his craft; the ink-rimmed nails, the hard lump on the middle finger of his right hand from much holding of the stylus, the criss-cross of little cuts on the ball of his left thumb where the knife had slipped cutting a pen, all marked him a writer, as clearly as the stains of cadmium and cinnabar on Quintus's hands marked him an artist, or the rein-callouses on Castor's fingers marked him a charioteer. I could not face seeing those hands useless, perhaps no longer beautiful. My thoughts worked round and round, following always the same track until I fell asleep on the floor.

I was woken next morning by one of Cornelia's servants who said his mistress was back in town and here was a note. It read: 'I have brought my brother's body in, and

it is to be burnt this morning. I have found a man of your religion to say the appropriate prayers. If you wish to come the servant will bring you.' That was all. I had been closer to him than wife or mistress or friend, but it was his sister who brought in his body for burial.

CHAPTER XXII

I had underestimated the extent to which Tiberius's death could hurt after that first knock. At least I was spared seeing the body; we arrived late at the funeral and there were only fluffy ashes. Gaius arrived later still, flashily dressed and with an appalling changover; the first thing he said was: 'Where's the ring? It's mine now,' to which Cornelia replied: 'I'm keeping it till you're grown up. You'd only sell it if I gave it you now,' which was true, and quite unanswerable. In fact he disappeared from home about a week later, and never got it at all. My heart was thawing again by the morning of the funeral, capable of feeling pain at the Scriptural Greek prayers said by Luke – that Greek that Tiberius had praised so. It was the prayers that hurt most, as if only they brought home his death. We went to the Lord's supper the next Sunday and thereafter, and I had to listen to the prayer for 'our brothers and sisters fallen asleep in Christ' – the ever-lengthening list of Judes and Jacobs, Eumolpuses and Eutychiuses, Rufuses and Gaiuses, with Tiberius's name sandwiched in the middle. Soon I knew the order of the names well, and waited, tense, for Tiberius's name to come up, the inevitable blow in the stonfach which always followed, though fainter and fainter each time. Aristobulus had gone, Paul was to go, but I had tears for none except Tiberius. Then there was the continual horror of thinking I saw him in the street: momentarily someone with his gait or way of draping the cloak, a loose shoe-sole slapping on the pavement or the same carriage of the head would bear a horrid likeness to him. Thank Heaven I never saw a pair of hands to match his.

Meanwhile the conspirators continued coming and talking and drinking our wine and doing bugger-all. They pointed out that we were bound to succeed since there was a comet that year which meant a new Emperor soon, they said that the people were solid behind us and it would be a push-over. They were completely confident, the one thing no one was prepared to do was actually to stick a knife into the Caesar. We were not the only ones who were infuriated by the delay; Epicharis was urging the others on and finally tried to rope in Volusius Proculus, a captain in the fleet at Misenum. He had helped in the murder of Agrippina, and felt that he had not been rewarded as he deserved. Epicharis had hopes of using him as a stepping-stone to getting the whole Misenum fleet on our side. Consequently she pointed out to him all the advantages of murdering Nero and suggested that he and the rest of the fleet might themselves to do this, and Proculus listened, and agreed with everything she said, and then went and told the Emperor. She was hauled up and questioned but there were no witnesses and she denied everything. They kept her a prisoner though.

However, she had at least achieved her object. The conspirators for the first time set about fixing the date of the murder. At first they suggested that Piso should get Nero to dinner at his villa at Baiae and polish him off then, but Piso pointed out the sacred duties of hospitality, etc - 'you can't really do that sort of thing, can you?' Actually he was frightened that if he was not proclaimed Emperor immediately after the murder, preferably even before it was made public, someone quite unconnected with the plot would proclaim himself saviour of the state, execute the conspirators and reap what we had sown. In the end we fixed the day for April 12th, the first day of the games of Ceres. Everything was worked out to the last detail. Lateranus was to fling himself at the feet of the Emperor as if as a suppliant, drag him to the ground and hold him

there while he was stabbed. Scaevinus claimed the honour of striking the first blow, and had a special dagger for the purpose – naturally the mania for amulets being what it was just any dagger would not do – which he had taken from the temple of Fortune at Ferentinum. Piso was to wait in the temple of Ceres, and once the killing was over the Praetorian faction led by Faenius would carry him shoulder-high to the camp and proclaim him Emperor. I was cynical enough to wonder whether, when it came to the point, they would not just leave him waiting there while they proclaimed someone else Emperor, probably Seneca. Anyway it was all fixed, 'So nothing can possibly go wrong,' said Piso; 'speed on the fateful day.' The whole company grabbed at once at the nearest piece of wood.

April 12th dawned fine. Castor was racing that morning and went off to the Circus early – 'Thought I doubt if my race will happen' – accompanied by Aquila. I took Titus round to Cornelia's; since her child had died she had Titus to see her often and spoilt him abominably, and then I followed the others to the Circus. Most of the conspirators were already hanging about outside though the Emperor would not arrive for another two hours. I found Castor half-dressed trying miserably to be sick on an empty stomach. We had calmed him down and were strapping his greaves when Subrius appeared in the doorway. 'How goes it?' asked Castor. 'He's not here yet, is he?'

'He's not nor likely to be. He's got better things to do.'

'What do you mean? What's up?'

Subrius looked up and down the passage outside and finding it empty came into the room and started to talk very softly. 'You know Milichus – Scaevinus's freedman – well, it seems he's turned informer.'

'He wasn't in on it, was he?' said Castor.

'No, but it seems Scaevinus was in a terrible state altering his will, and freeing some of his slaves, and having a particularly good dinner in case it was his last on earth,

and getting Milichus to polish that dam' dagger of his and prepare bandages, so Milichus smelt a rat and went off to the palace first thing this morning. They're questioning Scaevinus now.'

Castor was trying to be sick again, but succeeded in bringing up nothing but spit. 'Well, where do we go from here?' asked Aquila.

'Piso's.'

'I thought you didn't favour Piso,' said Castor unstrapping his greaves.

'I don't but he's the only person who can cope with this situation. Come on now.' Castor flung a cloak over his racing tunic and we hurried off, disregarding the other conspirators outside.

We found Piso still being dressed, fussing even more than usual over his appearance. He sent away his valet when we came in and said, 'Well, what now? Don't tell me it's started already?'

'Plans are changed,' said Subrius. 'There's been a leak. Scaevinus is being questioned now. Look, if you act at once we may still pull it off. Otherwise we've had it. What with bribes and what with torture someone'll blab out all our names sooner or later. But if you get up on the rostra now and harangue the people, they'll be only too willing to sack the palace and, well, do the job for us. They only want a leader, and you're the ideal person.'

'Look, are you mad?' said Piso. 'You can't conduct a revolution like that. I'd have my head knocked off the nearest soldier before I'd got a dozen words out.'

'You'll have your head knocked off for certain if you don't act quick. Look I reckon you've got half the Praetorian solid behind you, against a gang of actors and fancy boys. Go and harangue the camp, if you like, only——' but Piso was gone. Outside we heard, 'Onesimus. Onesimus. Now you've got the tablets of my will. Bring 'em to me, I'll be wanting to alter it. And have the mules ready, I'm

leaving for Baiae soon, today or tomorrow, I'm not certain which. And, Onesimus – I'm going to make out your manumission papers today, it's about time I did that.' We heard him go away down the corridor, still giving instructions.

'Well, that's that,' said Subrius. 'Let's go to Lateranus's, maybe we'll get some sense out of him.'

At Lateranus's we found another conspirator, a Greek freedman from the palace, giving the news. 'Well, what's your news?' said Lateranus.

'Bad. Piso's got cold feet. We tried to persuade him to get up on the rostra and try and rouse the people, but he wasn't having any. He's making tracks for Baiae, quick as he can. Possibly Faenius Rufus could do something with the guard.'

'Rufus,' said the Greek. 'Don't make me laugh.'

'What's up now?'

'He's up at the palace now.'

'Don't say they've got him too.'

'They have not. When I left he was busy third-degreeing Natalis.'

'O God, no. Where does Natalis come in anyhow?'

'Milichus told 'em Scaevinus had had a long conversation with Natalis, so they hauled him up ~~too~~ and questioned 'em separately and their accounts didn't tally. They haven't told anything yet, but they're bound to soon.'

'Well, this is it, boys,' said Castor. 'He'll get away ~~maybe~~ with only giving two or three names, but they'll give other names, and in the end we'll all be in the soup.'

So we waited. First there and later in Subrius's house, while one after another people came in bringing the latest news. Natalis broke down in the end, and gave all the principal names and also Seneca's – not that he knew of Subrius's plan to put Seneca on the throne, but he knew well enough that the Emperor would be only too grateful for an excuse to get rid of Seneca. So Seneca died, giving a death-bed speech which, as Castor put it, 'smelt dis-

tinctly of the lamp,' and Natalis collected a free pardon as his reward. Lucan was implicated, and died repeating a particularly purple passage from the *Pharsalia*, after he had accused his own mother. This charge even the Emperor considered too absurd to follow up, and she was not even questioned. The more charitable said that Lucan had foreseen that this would happen. Epicharis was questioned under torture, but survived one day of it in silence, and hanged herself in her belt before they could start on her again. Piso committed suicide, and by leaving most of his property to the Emperor managed to salvage some for his wife.

One by one the conspirators were mopped up, as well as plenty who were completely innocent. The ports were watched, the walls were watched, the Emperor had brought in a large number of German troops, not daring to trust the native ones, and the streets were full of fair shaggy giants.

The Praetorian faction went unscathed for some time; indeed, Subrius was present at at least one cross-questioning. At one point when the Emperor was looking the other way, he put his hand to his sword-hilt and raised one eyebrow at Faenius next to him. A nod and we might still have been successful, but Faenius shook his head and Subrius let the hand drop. In the end Scaevinus, exasperated beyond measure by Faenius's cross-examination, pointed out that no one could tell Nero more than he could and Faenius lost his nerve completely, broke down and told all he knew. Subrius went next. He put up a good defiance at first, saying what would he be doing with a bunch of playboys like those, but in the end he could no longer keep it up, and gave himself the immense pleasure of telling Nero exactly what he thought of him in hard plain words, with no rhetorical flourishes. 'Done him no end of good,' said one of the confederates who had witnessed this. 'He didn't half get a shock. No one's told him the truth about

himself for years, I bet.' So Subrius was led away to the execution ground where a grave had already been dug. 'How the hell d'you expect me to fit into a thing that size?' said Subrius. 'The Empire must be rotten indeed if you can't even obey orders enough to dig a grave properly.' 'Right, that's enough,' said the tribune. 'Hold your head out and hold it steady now.' 'I only hope you can strike steady,' Subrius said. The tribune was trembling badly enough as it was; in the end he managed to get through the neck with two hacks.

That evening Subrius's butler came up to our room. 'Lady Cornelia instructed me to bring you this,' he said, producing a minute bundle done up in wash-leather. 'She decided to follow my master, and having arranged her affairs and manumitted all her slaves, including myself, she severed her veins. She asked me to convey to you and your family her farewells, and the warmest expressions of affection.' He left, and I opened the little parcel. It contained Tiberius's ring.

There were no tears for Cornelia. We had reached the point where despair had gone full circle and reached, if not hope, at any rate calm, and our eyes had wept themselves dry. Next to go – and this too we took with utter calm – was Aquila. Or rather, Aquila disappeared: we never heard that he was tried, and the greyhounds went too, whereas if they had been turned loose they would have found their way home, as they had often done before when they had slipped their collars. 'I can't see Aquila getting killed,' said Castor. 'Somehow he seems almost immortal. I reckon he must just have found an opportunity to slip out past the guards and taken it.'

That was what we were all looking for. Castor and I hardly ever went home now and he never went to the Circus. Instead we wandered up and down the streets with Titus, and a few possessions: my jewellery, Tiberius's ring, our savings, and some tattered books: Sappho,

Alcaeus, Tiberius's copy of the Eclogues, with his *Copa Surisca* copied out on the back of it. We were wandering round one night about midnight, with Titus asleep, wrapped in a blanket, tired ourselves but not daring to go home, when we ran into Felix, a colleague of Castor's. 'Metellus! Where've you been hiding yourself? I haven't seen you this long while.'

'Strained my leg a bit,' said Castor. 'I didn't want to be racing till it was quite mended.'

'Oh that's bad,' said Felix obviously not believing a word of this. 'Reckon Rome's not a very healthy place to mend a bad leg.'

'Perhaps not.'

'Well, why don't you take yourself off somewhere else for the summer?'

'What, with the city surrounded with hairy barbarians who shout first and challenge after? Have a heart.'

'Oh they're not as bad as all that. I know the commander of the guard at the Appian gate tonight. Going out that way myself now. See a girl I know, mile or so south of here. Going to marry her some day - she thinks. Got any money?'

'A little.'

'How much?'

'Have to see.' He turned his back on Felix, and, under cover of his cloak, transferred most of the money from his purse to my jewel case. 'Thousand sesterces, about.'

'That'll do.' Castor handed it over. 'Right, come on.' Castor picked up Titus, and we went.

At the gate we were met by a loud challenge. 'Felix of the Greens,' was the answer.

'Good man, I won a packet on you today. The soldier's friend. If you want to double your pay here's the man to put it on. Who've you got with you?'

'With me?' said Felix in astonishment. A faint chink of metal. 'There's no one with me. You drunk, or what?'

'Well I'm damned. Funny the way shadows can look so real in this light. Good night then, and enjoy yourself.'

'Don't worry, I shall.' The gates were opened a crack, and slammed again and we stood free under a full moon and cloudy sky.

'I should keep walking till dawn,' said Felix, 'and lie up during the day, at any rate till you are well south. They have German cavalry all over this part of the country in the daytime.'

We walked on for about another quarter of an hour and then Felix said, 'Goodbye: this then is where we part company. Good luck to you: the Greens'll miss you badly.' Then he plunged off into the darkness.

'To Baiae, I suppose?' I said.

'That's best, I think; we can lie up at Venus's if the port's being watched.'

'And afterwards?'

'To Athens. It's a long time since I saw Athens.'

It was starting to rain now. Castor wrapped the blanket more tightly round Titus, and put part of his cloak round my shoulders, and we set off down the long road to Greece.